

Working Situation of Women Home-based Industrial Workers in Bangladesh: Issues and Way Forward





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and

Creative Pathways Bangladesh

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Acronyms

BDT	Bangladesh Taka
FES	Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GoB	Government of Bangladesh
HBW	Home-based Women Workers
HH	Household
IDI	In-Depth Interview
ILO	International Labour Organization
KII	Key Informant Interviews
KN	Karmojibi Nari
PWD	Person with Disabilities
RMG	Readymade Garment
SSN	Social Safety Net
OSH	Occupational Safety and Health
QUAL	Qualitative
QUANT	Quantitative



Glossary

Taka	Bangladeshi currency
Karchupi	Karchupi work is a type of hand embroidery that involves using gold and silver thread to decorate tightly stretched cloth. The name of the embroidery depends on the type of yarn used. Karchupi work is also known as adi and iri.
Mohajans	a person whose business is lending money, usually at a very high rate of interest.



Acknowledgements

The research team of Creative Pathways Bangladesh has undertaken the study on current working situation of women home-based industrial workers in Bangladesh'. The research team is extremely thankful Dr. Felix Gerdes, Resident Representative, Felix Kolbitz, former Resident Representative and Arifa As Alam, Programme Advisor of Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES Bangladesh), Sunzida Sultana, Additional Executive Director and Hasina Akther, Project Coordinator of Karmojibi Nari for overall coordination, providing labour assistance and advice on various steps of conducting the research activity within the specified timeline. We would like to express our gratitude towards our Technical expert in Gender, Ms. Selina Ahmed who support us in preparing tools and the report using gender lens. We would also like to express thanks and profound gratitude to the field coordinator, and field management staff for their overall field management, guidance, coordination, and quality time support to conduct the field successfully in each research location. We are particularly grateful to the participants i.e., Home-based workers, HBW women group, sub-contractor, sector specialized, trade union women leaders as well as other relevant participants who took part in the quantitative survey and qualitative interviews, FGDs, and KIIs. We sincerely acknowledge the guidance and advice from KN authorities to conduct the research activity fruitfully. We all knew the field was very difficult to conduct all interviews (Surveys, KIIs, and FGDs), so the research team is grateful to all the participants for their valuable time and impactful contributions. Finally, the research team would like to thank all the data enumerators and data analysts for their hard work, even during weekends, to complete the assignment successfully.

Research Team

Creative Pathways Bangladesh, June 2024





Foreword from Nari Sramik Kantha (NSK) and Karmojibi Nari (KN)

The informal economy plays a crucial role in the economies of developing countries like Bangladesh. It has a significant impact on employment generation and overall economic output. However, workers in informal employment or informal enterprises are more vulnerable to economic and social shocks. Both women and men contribute substantially to Bangladesh's economy within the informal sector, but their labor often goes unrecognized, and they are deprived of dignity as workers. In Bangladesh, Home-based women workers (HBWs) comprise a notable RMG and textile value chain segment. Many women, undertake different tasks of the RMG and Textile value chain sector from the confines of their homes due to economic necessity and limited employment opportunities. However, this informal nature of the work of Home-based Workers presents numerous challenges. These HBWs face issues related to social isolation, limited access to benefits, and gender disparities. The absence of strong unions and legal protection further exacerbates their vulnerability.

In response to these issues, Karmojibi Nari (KN) has conducted a research study titled “Current Working Situation of Women Home-based Industrial Workers in Bangladesh” with the support of FES, Bangladesh. This study aims to assess the current working conditions of women in these specific industries and to promote discussions about the violations of women's rights in the workplace, concerning national commitments. The research data shows that labor Rights are not implemented properly, often isolating women workers from the benefits and protections available in the formal sector, and making them vulnerable to exploitation and wage suppression. Additionally, the irregular nature of home-based work exacerbates financial instability, leading to uncertain incomes and difficulties in meeting family needs. The research identified a disconnection between Home-based women workers and their actual employers, as these workers primarily engage with subcontractors. This detachment hinders women's ability to assert their rights or negotiate better working conditions.





Based on the research findings, several recommendations have been put forward to highlight the current working conditions of women, particularly concerning rights violations. The involvement of government institutions, policymakers, and public representatives is essential for the effective implementation of these recommendations. It is hoped that the insights gained from this research will significantly contribute to making Bangladesh's economy more sustainable and safeguarding the interests of Home-based women workers.

KN expresses heartfelt gratitude to FES Bangladesh for their support in conducting this study. We extend our thanks to the Research Team and all those who contributed data for this work. If this research data can help advance the rights of Home-based women workers in the informal sector, our efforts will be worthwhile. Let us each take action from our respective positions to implement the study's recommendations, ensuring the recognition and labor rights of HBWs.

With Thanks

Shirin Akhter

Founder President, Karmojibi Nari (KN) &
Coordinator, Nari Sramik Kantha (NSK)

Dilnasheen Mohsen

President, Karmojibi Nari (KN)





Foreword from Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), Bangladesh

We are pleased to present the study "The Current Working Situation of Women Home-based Industrial Workers in Bangladesh," commissioned through the collaboration between the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), Bangladesh office, and Karmojibi Nari (KN). Since 2015, FES Bangladesh has been a staunch advocate for workers' rights in both formal and informal sectors, with Karmojibi Nari (KN) as a key collaborative partner.

Home-based workers (HBWs) play a significant yet often hidden role in the global economy. Predominantly performed by women, this form of employment typically involves tasks carried out at home, often on a piece-rate basis, and usually coordinated through intermediaries or unpaid family labour. Whether in developing or developed nations, Home-based workers contribute to various stages of production, providing the backbone for industries across sectors. However, their efforts often go unrecognised, and their contributions are seldom reflected in national economic data.

Home-based workers are those who independently produce goods or services at home for the market, or who follow an employer's specifications, regardless of who supplies the materials. This study sheds light on their often-overlooked role in the value chain, particularly women involved in textile and garment production. Through this research, we gain a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities these workers face, which is crucial for addressing their needs and protecting their rights. The research underscores the urgent need to formalise Home-based work in order to safeguard this vital yet vulnerable workforce, while emphasising the role of stakeholders in promoting fair labour practices. It also highlights the precarious working conditions of HBWs, emphasising the critical need for social protection measures to secure their rights and well-being.

The findings reveal the barriers preventing these women workers from integrating into the formal economy, where protections such as minimum wage, leave entitlements, working hours, maternity benefits, healthcare, and





safe working environments are better enforced. Transitioning HBWs to the formal sector would not only enhance their financial security and social protection but also align with international standards, such as those outlined in the German Due Diligence Act. Advocating for such transitions is key to fostering greater equality, empowerment, and resilience for women workers in Bangladesh, while also addressing the need for rectifying ILO Convention 177.

We hope this report will serve as a valuable resource for policymakers, duty-bearers, industry leaders, and advocates, to create a more inclusive and equitable work environment for informal HBWs. As we look towards a future where all workers, including the unseen, are recognised and protected by existing labour laws and policies, this study aims to catalyse meaningful change.

We sincerely thank Ms. Zakia Haque and her team for designing, implementing, analysing, and presenting the findings of this report, as well as for their contributions to the data validation and policy advocacy workshops held this year. We also express our gratitude to Ms. Shirin Akhter, Ex-Member of Parliament and Coordinator of NSK, for her tremendous support towards the research, and to Ms. Sunzida Sultana, Additional Executive Director of KN, and her team for their ongoing support, guidance, monitoring, and supervision throughout the entire research process.

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Executive Summary

The concept of Home-based work is intricate and diverse, taking on different forms in various regions. In Asia, it often pertains to women who work from their homes, receiving assignments through intermediaries. In developed countries, Home-based workers, also known as piece-rate workers, engage in different production stages and typically secure work through intermediaries. Home-based work is a growing global phenomenon across various industries, although these workers often remain unseen. According to WEIGO, Home-based workers encompass those who independently produce goods and services in their homes for the market and those who perform work in their homes for pay, following the specifications of their employer(s), regardless of who provides the materials or inputs.

The study sought to understand the unique challenges and opportunities encountered by Home-based workers, particularly those involved in textile and garment production. Its objective is to reveal the concealed labour force within the value chain and to understand the intricacies of formalization, offering valuable insights for various stakeholders dedicated to safeguarding labour rights in this pivotal economic sector.

The research employed a mixed methods approach, combining both qualitative (QUAL) and quantitative (QUANT) methodologies. Quantitative data was collected through surveys, while qualitative data was gathered through a literature review of existing studies and policies, Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) involving participants relevant to the research. The research team surveyed 400 Home-based women workers situated in Bhashantek, Kodomtoli, Mir Hazaribagh, Mirpur, Mohammadpur, Rampura and Savar of Dhaka City for quantitative data collection purposes. Also, 13 KIIs, 15 FGDs and 6 Case Stories were collected as qualitative data. This approach enabled an in-depth exploration of the subject, incorporating various data collection, analysis, and inference techniques.

The socio-demographic situation of Home-based women workers is highly diverse and influenced by factors such as region, industry, and local conditions. Despite this diversity, certain socio-demographic characteristics are commonly identified among this group. Some of the key socio-demographic findings are-

- a. **Age Group:** Based on the data, the age distribution of Home-based women workers varies across different areas. In Bhasantek, the highest percentage falls within the 20-24 years old and 31-36 years old age groups, both at 22.95%. Mirpur mainly consists of workers in the 25-30 years old category (32.76%), while Mir Hazaribagh (22.95%), Pallabi (34.31%), Rampura (37.50%), and Savar (35.00%) predominantly consist of workers aged 25-30 years. Kodomtoli sees 36.36% of workers in the 31-36 years old age group, while Mohammadpur exhibits a different pattern with 20% of respondents being 16-19 years old and another 20% falling into the 31-36 years old age bracket, highlighting diversity in the age profiles of Home-based women workers across different areas.

- b. Education:** Regarding educational background, the survey data indicates that the majority of Home-based workers have completed primary education in all surveyed locations, reflecting a foundational level of formal education. Mir Hazaribagh has the lowest percentage (1.64%) of participants without any formal education, with similarly low percentages in Mohammadpur (3.64%) and Pallabi (3.92%). A relatively small proportion of respondents in Mohammadpur (1.82%) and Pallabi (1.96%) have achieved the milestone of completing their graduation.
- c. Marital Status:** Marital status data reveals that all participants in Kodomtoli are married. The highest percentages of unmarried participants are found in as stated above (22.41%), Mohammadpur (18.18%), and Pallabi (18.63%). Mohammadpur has the highest percentage of widowed respondents (3.64%), followed by Pallabi, where 4.90% of respondents are widowed. When it comes to divorce or separation, Bhashantek stand out with 5.17% of respondents from as stated above and 3.28% of respondents from Bhashantek being divorced or separated.
- d. Head of the Family:** According to the survey, 86.22% of households are led by males, while 13.78% are headed by females. Out of 400 participants, 56 are from female-headed households. Among these women, 16.67% are self-employed, and 89.09% work as subcontractors. Most FGD participants across various locations noted that financial decisions are primarily made by men. In Bhashantek, participants mentioned that they give part of their earnings to their mother-in-law and invest the remainder.
- e. Monthly Income:** The survey data reveals that most HBW who earn less than BDT 3,000 to BDT 8,000 is in sub-contracted work, with 66% earning less than BDT 3,000 and 13% earning between BDT 5,000 to BDT 8,000. In contrast, self-employed workers earn higher, with 91% earning between BDT 8,000 to BDT 12,000, and only 3% earning more than BDT 15,000. Overall, 59% of workers earn less than BDT 3,000 and do sub-contracting work, while a mere 1% of self-employed workers earn between BDT 12,000 to BDT 15,000.
- f. Monthly Expenditure:** The survey findings show that the majority of self-employed workers (39%) have a monthly expenditure of BDT 8,000 to 12,000, while most sub-contracted workers (29%) spend less than BDT 3,000. Conversely, only 3% of self-employed workers and 12% of sub-contracted workers have a monthly expenditure of less than BDT 3,000 and BDT 12,000 to 15,000, respectively. Overall, the highest proportion of HBW (27%) have a monthly expenditure of less than BDT 3,000, primarily from the sub-contracted worker category, and the lowest proportion (10%) spend more than BDT 15,000, mainly from the self-employed category.

Types of Work

According to the FGD, KII, and survey respondents, HBWs engage in a variety of tasks related to the production process in the RMG and textile value chain. Tasks include fabric handling, attaching buttons, zippers, creating seams and hems, ironing, sewing, and embroidery. In Bhashantek, workers operate in small and rented factories or at home. In Mirpur- 1, they perform mirror and stone embellishments, while in Mohammadpur, they specialize in





embroidery and stone detailing. Pallabi workers focus on karchupi, mirror, stonework, and paper bag making, and Mir Hazaribagh's workers handle button pressing/making. In Savar, they engage in karchupi, stone and mirror set, and hand and machine embroidery, and Rampura's workers tailor clothes at home or collaborate with local shops. HBWs source raw materials primarily from sub-contracting factories and engage in self-employed or sub-contracted work, often leveraging factory relationships for new orders. The majority of HBWs (42.11%) are involved in karchupi, 21.30% in sewing and cutting, and only 0.25% in washing and dyeing. Work experience ranges from less than a year to over eight years, with 53.63% of participants having over eight years of experience, and 6.77% having less than a year.

Working Conditions

Many HBWs transitioned from garment factories due to age-related factors, as factories discourage hiring women over 30, and challenges with pregnancy and childcare. Compliant factories provide daycare, but with limited capacity and unskilled staff, leading to mistrust. Family illness or marriage commitments also contribute to this shift. Regarding work order regularity, 44.61% of HBWs believe they regularly secure work, 24.81% perceive it as often, 21.30% see it as irregular, and 9.27% consider it occasional. Job security is generally poor, with conditions varying by location. Mohammadpur has harsh living conditions, Rampura HBWs focus on tailoring, and Mir Hazaribagh has regular work through local "Mohajans." Mirpur 1 women work under sub-contractors with flexible contracts, Pallabi has irregular work post-COVID-19, Mohammadpur operates informally, and Bhashantek faces networking challenges. Savar workers rely on local subcontractors, but work availability decreased during the pandemic.

Sector challenges include insufficient work (41%), lack of equipment and skills (both 19%), relationships with contractors (12%), and limited knowledge (6%). Many HBWs live in slums with poor sanitation, lack fair wages, formal contracts, and benefits. Cramped workspaces cause health issues, and children often join in, compromising their education. Despite poor conditions, some HBWs value the ability to balance work with household activities and childcare.

Involvement in Home-based Work

Participants reported that most initially got involved in Home-based work through neighbours (54%) and family members (37%), with fewer through contractors (5%), friends (2%), and others (2%). In areas like Mohammadpur, Bhashantek, Pallabi, Mirpur 1, Mir Hazaribagh, Rampura, and Savar, female family members often help with household chores and Home-based tasks. Husbands typically do not participate in these chores, adhering to traditional gender roles.

In Savar, male family members help when home, but overall, only 34.09% of participants reported receiving support from male family members, while 54.89% disagreed, and 11.03% were unsure. The lack of male support forces many women to leave factory jobs for Home-based work. Experts stress the importance of changing societal perceptions and reforming labour policies to create a more inclusive, women-friendly environment.

Income and expenditure

FGD respondents stated that HBWs are typically paid based on the number of pieces they complete, keeping track of their output in notebooks. A significant majority (90.72%) reported receiving regular payments from clients or employers. Income distribution among HBWs shows that 59.09% earn less than BDT 3,000 per month, 18.51% earn BDT 3,000-5,000, 12.01% earn BDT 5,000-8,000, 9.42% earn BDT 8,000-12,000, 0.65% earn BDT 12,000-15,000, and only 0.32% earn more than BDT 15,000 per month. HBWs engage in diverse tasks across different Dhaka areas, earning variable and often low incomes. For example, workers in Mohammadpur earn around 50-60 BDT per saree, while those in Pallabi make 70 BDT per 100 sweet boxes. Mir Hazaribagh workers earn 100 BDT daily for 10,000 button presses, often facing gender-based income disparities.

Bhashantek and Mirpur 1 exhibit more varied spending behaviours with significant percentages of lower-income households spending in higher brackets, suggesting financial strain or higher costs of living. Kodomtoli and Savar show a more uniform spending pattern within income limits, indicating potential financial constraints or disciplined spending. Mir Hazaribagh, Mohammadpur, and Pallabi present a mix of spending behaviours, with instances of significant overspending in lower-income groups, hinting at financial stress or prioritization of essential high-cost expenses. Rampura shows a balanced pattern, with higher income households displaying consistent spending within their means.

Health Issue

FGDs with women HBW highlighted the adverse health effects of extended work periods and poor living conditions in slums, leading to respiratory issues, headaches, skin diseases, stomach aches, and persistent back and shoulder discomfort. Eye-related problems, such as dry eyes, discomfort, headaches, impaired vision, and excessive tearing, are also prevalent, often exacerbated by inadequate lighting and the need to handle small materials like beads and stones. Many workers resort to pain relievers to continue working during festive occasions when rest is challenging. Survey results corroborated these findings, with 57.29% of participants reporting health risks associated with their work. Qualitative data from Rampura indicated leg pain and other issues due to prolonged use of sewing machines.

It is crucial for factories to address the specific health needs of women workers, with facilities such as health practitioners, counsellors, and health officers. Some Tier 1 factories already provide these services, including regular free health screening, health breaks, breastfeeding corners, and nutritional supplements for pregnant and new mothers. Such initiatives can mitigate health risks and improve the overall well-being of Home-based women workers.

Formal to informal

HBWs often prefer the informal work sector due to greater freedom and flexibility in work hours, particularly in the garment sector. Family responsibilities also drive this preference, with some women leaving RMG factories after marriage. While some HBWs understand the benefits of RMG factory work, others lack awareness, indicating a need for increased visibility of advantages like skills enhancement and financial security. Dysfunctional factory regulations contribute to negative perceptions of RMG work, with limited inspections and neglect of





lower-tier factories. Improved factory conditions could retain more female workers in the formal sector. Both the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) and Department of Inspections for Factories and Establishment (DIFE) needs to be encouraged to take the necessary actions to ensure laws are properly maintained in factories across all tiers to encourage more HBW to reintegrate into the formal RMG sector.

Facilities that are available in the Formal sector that are missing in the informal sector

Transitioning to Home-based work isolates workers from formal facilities, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and unsafe conditions, exacerbated by the absence of regulatory oversight. The irregularity of Home-based work amplifies financial instability (93.97% lack appointment letters or identity cards), leading to unpredictable incomes and challenges in meeting family needs, while the loss of specialized skills and absence of benefits like health insurance further disadvantage these workers in terms of healthcare access and long-term financial security.

Reasons Behind the Exclusion of Home-based Women Workers from the Formal Sector

Home-based women workers in Bangladesh face multiple barriers to inclusion in the formal sector, primarily due to competitive advantages for large factories and brands, which drive them to reduce costs by subcontracting work to smaller units or Home-based workers who are paid lower wages. This preference for flexible, less formal labour arrangements increases inventory efficiency and reduces production costs.

Importance of Including Home-based Women Workers in the Formal Sector

Inclusion of Home-based women workers in the formal sector is crucial for their economic empowerment and equality. Formalizing Home-based work provides women with more stable and predictable incomes, enhancing their financial independence and enabling them to contribute significantly to their households and communities.

Legal and social protections are essential. Formal sector inclusion ensures Home-based women workers are covered by labour laws, granting them rights such as minimum wage, safe working conditions, and protection against exploitation and harassment. Access to benefits like health insurance, pensions, and maternity leave is also crucial for their well-being. Compliance with international standards, such as the EU Due Diligence Directive, requires companies to adhere to human rights and environmental standards throughout their supply chains. Including Home-based workers in the formal sector helps multinational corporations comply with these regulations. Improved working conditions are another significant benefit. Formal sector jobs are subject to health and safety regulations, reducing the risks of workplace injuries and illnesses. Additionally, formal employment offers training and development opportunities, helping women enhance their skills and career prospects.

Government's Roles and Responsibilities/Initiatives

Ratification of ILO Convention 177	Bangladesh should ratify the ILO Home Work Convention 1996 (Convention no. 177 and Home Work Recommendation no. 184) and introduce or amend related laws, policies, legislation, or schemes to reflect the convention's principles and constraints, enabling activists to advocate for the rights of HBWs more effectively.
Recognition and Representation of HB work in the National Economy	The government should officially recognize "Home-based work" as an economic activity, distinguishing it from "unpaid family helpers." Additionally, data collection, including HBW information, should be integrated into labour force surveys and economic surveys to incorporate HBWs into national plans and strategies.
Declaration of National Minimum Wage	The government should declare a National Minimum Wage for all workers, ensuring fair compensation and economic stability, particularly for HBWs in the informal sector.
Start the process of formalization	Develop certification programs that verify the ethical treatment of Home-based workers and conduct regular audits to ensure compliance.

Employers' Initiatives

Training and Skill Development and Raising Awareness	Employers should offer training and skill development programs tailored to the unique needs of HBWs, including vocational training and digital literacy initiatives. Training programs and workshops can enhance the skills of HBWs, making them more competitive in their respective informal industries. Additionally, employers can increase awareness about the valuable contributions of HBWs to society and the economy. Collaborating with governments, NGOs, businesses, and international organizations to create a supportive platform that empowers and uplifts Home-based women workers.
Benefits and Rights	Employers should provide the legal rights and welfare supports as per existing Bangladeshi labour law 2006 such as health insurance, maternity leave with benefits and wages, fair wages, leave, working hours, enabling working environment and social protection such as pensions, to the industrial HBWs and ensure that women are aware of and can access these benefits. Advocating for fair wages in Home-based work, emphasizing equal pay for equal work, can help address gender wage disparities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Employers' Initiatives

Identifying Brands and Employers	Identifying brands, buyers, and employers in the RMG value chain and advocating for transparent pricing can ensure that HBWs receive fair wage and compensation for their work, contributing to decent work, improved living standards, and a more equitable and sustainable RMG industry.
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Ensure decent work (Safety and Health Measures)	Promoting occupational safety and health (OSH) is crucial, including raising awareness about safe working conditions and advocating for necessary safety measures.
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Workers' Initiatives

To encourage Home-based women workers (HBW) to participate in various initiatives, it is crucial to first implement policy reforms that formally recognize and integrate them into the national economy. Once this recognition is achieved, HBW will be more inclined to engage in the following further actions and initiatives.

Supportive Networks	Promoting the formation of women's self-help groups or cooperatives can provide essential support for sharing knowledge, pooling resources, and collectively addressing common challenges in the informal sector.
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Form and Join Occupation-Based Unions/Associations/Cooperatives	Forming and joining occupation-based unions, associations, or cooperatives is crucial for HBWs to collectively advocate for their legal rights and improve their working conditions.
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Civil Societies Initiatives

Advocacy and Policy Reform	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Advocate for the formal recognition of Home-based workers in labour laws, ensuring they are covered by minimum wage regulations, social security benefits, and other labour protections.- Work with government bodies to develop and enforce policies that support the integration of Home-based workers into the formal economy.
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Key Recommendations

Civil Societies Initiatives	
Capacity Building and Training Programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Provide skill development training programs to enhance their technical skills, financial and digital literacy and etc.- Offer training on entrepreneurship and small business management to empower women to start their own ventures or negotiate better terms with employers.- Help Home-based workers form unions to strengthen their collective bargaining power.- Provide legal assistance, referral and linkage support to Home-based workers to help them understand and exercise their rights.
Promoting Transparent Supply Chains	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Work with brands and factories to map out the entire supply chain, including subcontractors and Home-based workers with the collaboration of unions or federations etc.
Partnerships and Collaborations	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Partner with ethical brands committed to fair labour practices to create pilot programs that integrate Home-based workers into their formal supply chains.- Work with local and national governments to support the implementation of policies that benefit Home-based workers.
Research and Data Collection	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Conduct rigorous surveys and studies to gather data on the number of Home-based workers, their working conditions, and economic contributions.- Evaluate the impact of formalization initiatives on Home-based workers to refine and improve strategies.



1

Introduction

Working Situation of Women Home-based Industrial Workers in Bangladesh: Issues and Way Forward

Home-based Work refers to employment or work activities that are conducted within the confines of an individual's residence or in a structure or area directly connected to their home¹ Home-based workers are workers who produce goods and/ or provide services, from in and around their own homes. There are approximately 100 million Home-based workers across the world, of which 50 million are from South Asia. Home-based workers are present in both urban and rural areas. Most of them are women workers. There are two categories of Home-based workers: a) Self-Employed Workers: Most self-employed Home-based workers are own account operators who do not hire workers. However, they may have contributing family workers working alongside them. They buy their raw materials and are involved in the production process from start to finish. They have direct contact with the market - making and retailing products or providing services from in and around their homes. b) Sub-Contracted Workers: They are also known as homeworkers or piece-rate workers. They are sub-contracted by firms, traders, organizations, or their intermediaries. Homeworkers receive workers' orders with specifications, are provided with raw materials, and are paid for the piece produced. They do not have direct access to the market. This means that they rarely know who their primary employer (or the retail company they produce for) is where the products they make are finally sold and at what price.²

Home-based workers are individuals who perform economic activities from their homes or other non-traditional workplaces. They can be categorized into different types, including (a) Homeworkers: These workers carry out tasks like garment production, packaging, or data entry from their homes. (b) Telecommuters: Telecommuters work for organizations but do so remotely from their homes using technology. (c) Freelancers/Independent Contractors: These workers are self-employed and provide services such as writing, graphic design, or IT support from their homes³.

Commonalities among Home-based workers include shared characteristics and experiences that are often associated with this type of work. These commonalities can vary depending on the context and region, but some key aspects are: (a) Lack of a Formal Workspace: Home-based workers typically lack access to a traditional workplace. Instead, they work from their homes, which may not be adequately equipped for their work activities. This can lead to challenges related to workspace organization and safety⁴. (b) Low-Income Status: Many Home-based workers, especially those in the informal sector, often earn low incomes. This can be due to the informal and sometimes unregulated nature of their work, which may result in lower wages⁵. (c) Flexibility and Autonomy: Home-based workers generally have a high degree of flexibility in managing their work. They can often set their hours and have

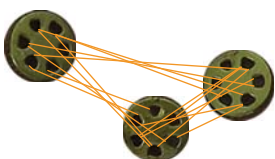
¹ Bangladesh Labour Foundation. *Increasing Knowledge and Capacity of Home-based Workers*. Retrieve from: <https://www.blfd.com/home-based-workers/>

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³ Chen, M. A. (2005). 'Rethinking the Informal Economy: Linkages with the Formal Economy and the Formal Regulatory Environment. *Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing*. WIEGO

⁴ ILO. (2002). *Decent work and the informal economy*. International Labour Organization.

⁵ Chen, M. A. (2012). *The Informal Economy: Recent Trends, Future Directions*. Economic and Labour Market Paper, No. 2009/3. International Labour Organization.





some autonomy in deciding how to complete tasks. This flexibility can be an advantage for work-life balance⁶. (d) Challenges: Home-based workers face several common challenges, including limited access to social protection, job security concerns, and sometimes social isolation. Informal and irregular work arrangements can exacerbate these challenges⁷.

The work arrangements of Home-based workers can vary widely depending on factors such as the type of work they perform, their employment status, and the industry in which they are engaged. Home-based workers, particularly in the informal sector, face challenges in accessing labour rights. They experience job insecurity, a lack of occupational safety measures, and limited social protection⁸. Payment structures for Home-based workers vary. They receive hourly wages, piece rates, project-based payments, or a combination. Many Home-based workers, especially those in the informal sector, often earn low incomes. This can be due to the informal and sometimes unregulated nature of their work, which result in lower wages. Payment structures influence their income and economic security⁹. The geographical location of Home-based workers also impacts their work arrangement. In urban areas, Home-based workers have access to better infrastructure and connectivity, whereas those in rural areas face challenges related to access to markets and resources¹⁰.

Home-based work can encompass a wide variety of occupations and industries, including but not limited to professional services, administrative roles, creative work, customer service, manufacturing, and even certain agricultural tasks that occur in proximity to one's home. In Bangladesh, a substantial 92% of women workers are engaged in the informal sector, with a growing number involved in non-agricultural Home-based work. Urban areas witnessed women's active participation in textile and garment manufacturing, making up around 21% of Home-based workers¹¹. Home-based work in Bangladesh comprises of outsourcing of certain labour-intensive tasks to Home-Based Workers (HBW) by small and medium enterprises producing for the local market and by some garment factories producing for export to other countries, as well as home-based craft production for a family enterprise or as self-employed. The majority of Home-based workers are women, for whom this work has low opportunity cost as it can be combined with their household and care responsibilities, and since it does not require breaking with cultural norms, it also entails relatively little cost for family and community. Women's Home-based work is seen as an extension of their

⁶ Sutherland, M., & Saldaña, L. (2010). *Women homeworkers in global supply chains*. *International Labour Review*, 149(4), 447-460.

⁷ Bonner, C., & Martin, R. (2009). *Women in the UK labour market*. In *Women in the Age of Economic Transformation* (pp. 9-28). Palgrave Macmillan.

⁸ Betcherman, G., Olivas, K., & Dar, A. (2004). *Impacts of active labour market programs: New evidence from evaluations with particular attention to developing and transition countries*. *World Bank Policy Research Working Paper*, (3224).

⁹ Hegewisch, A., & Gornick, J. C. (2011). *The impact of work-family policies on women's employment: A review of research from OECD countries*. *Community, Work & Family*, 14(2), 119-138.

¹⁰ Milgram, P., & Nijhuis, M. (2019). *Home-based work and labor market outcomes: Evidence from the United States*. *Regional Science and Urban Economics*, 79, 103485.

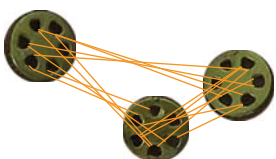
¹¹ WIEGO. (n.d.). *Statistical Brief No. 25: Bangladesh*. Retrieve from: https://www.wiego.org/sites/default/files/publications/file/WIEGO_Statistical_Brief_N25_Bangladesh%20final.pdf

domestic work. As a result, in Bangladesh and other countries in South Asia as well, women's home-based work is invisible both socially and from a policy perspective.

In Bangladesh, women Home-based Workers comprise a significant part of the informal sector of the economy. According to Bangladesh Labour Foundation (BLF), 71% of all women workers, compared to 20% of all male workers, are Home-based¹². They lack collective bargaining skills, knowledge about Occupational Safety and Health (OSH), and social protection. Besides, they face the problems of exploitation, low wages, and lack of secure contracts. In addition, they have to pay for many of the non-wage costs of production like costs of space and storage, utilities and equipment, etc.

Since 2015, Karmojibi Nari (KN) has partnered with the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) in Bangladesh to promote gender equality and women's representation in collective initiatives, particularly within trade unions and labour rights organizations. As part of this collaboration, they established the "Nari Sramik Kantha-NSK" (Women Workers Voice) platform, dedicated to women workers' leadership and the protection of workers' rights in both formal and informal sectors. To comprehensively assess the working conditions of female Home-based workers in the textile and garment manufacturing sub-sector, KN attempted to conduct a study on women workers in the informal sector in cooperation with FES, shedding light on the challenges and opportunities faced by this often-overlooked workforce, especially those engaged in textile and garment manufacturing. This research aimed to unveil the hidden workforce within the value chain and the dynamics of formalization, providing valuable insights for KN and stakeholders to safeguard labour rights in this vital sector of the economy.

¹² Dey, S. (2015). An assessment of the situation of women home workers in Dhaka city, Bangladesh. *International Journal of Green Economics*, 9(1), 24-34.





2

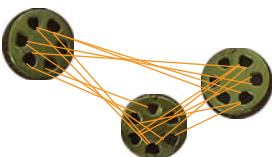
Research Objective

Working Situation of Women Home-based Industrial Workers in Bangladesh: Issues and Way Forward

The research study aims to understand the current working situation of women Home-based industrial workers to advance discussions on the rights violation issues of women workers related to national commitments.

The specific objectives of this study are:

- A. To understand the working situation of the women Home-based industrial workers directly involved with the textile and garment manufacturing sub-sectors.
- B. To track the growing formalization process in the RMG and textile value chain.
- C. To identify positive and negative trends and gaps in the implementation of existing policies concerning the rights of women workers and workers in general that affect female Home-based industrial workers. Such as -
 - Is weekly leave applicable for her?
 - Is she treated as a permanent worker according to the policy/law?
 - Is her work decent as per decent work indication? etc.





3

Methodology

Working Situation of Women Home-based
Industrial Workers in Bangladesh:
Issues and Way Forward

The Research was carried out in a mixed methods approach containing combined elements of qualitative (QUAL) and quantitative (QUANT) approaches such as using QUAL and QUANT data collection, viewpoints, analysis, and inference techniques. For this study, the quantitative data collection was undertaken using surveys and the qualitative data collection involved a literature review (of existing studies and policies), Key Informant Interviews (KIs), and Focus Group Discussion (FGDs), directly from the participants who are relevant for this research.

3.1 Literature Review

Home-based workers are workers who produce goods and/ or provide services, from in and around their own homes. There are approximately 100 million Home-based workers across the world, of which 50 million are from South Asia¹³. In the global RMG and textile value chain, both formal and informal sector exists and low-cost countries—such as China, India, and Bangladesh—are emerging as leaders in the lower-value assembly segments of the value chain due to their low-cost labour-intensive manufacturing and the existence of large informal sector¹⁴. ‘Informal’ workers include Home-based workers supplying subcontracted labour to the export garment factories through agents and contractors working on a piece rate basis. This section of the workforce (mainly married women with children and low skills) having few market choices and no bargaining power with the employers, generates a plentiful pool of ‘cheap’ female labour¹⁵. The major brands placing orders can only track garments back to the factory and are hesitant to demand transparency in the value chain by requiring factories to document their sub-contracted factories or labour¹⁶. As global politics informalize the formal sectors and not to recognize the HBWs as a worker in RMG value chain hence, the employers and brands can avoid providing labour rights to the industrial HBW working in RMG value chain.

WIEGO's Informal Economy Monitoring Study (IEMS) conducted in Ahmedabad-India, Bangkok, and Lahore-Pakistan shed light on the vital contributions of Home-based workers. According to the findings, HBW play a crucial role in sustaining their households, enhancing family life by being able to care for dependents, fostering social cohesion within their communities, and reducing emissions and congestion due to their non-commuting work style. Additionally, they offer goods and services to the public at affordable prices, contribute to the public coffers through taxes on purchases, and maintain connections with formal firms, highlighting their economic significance¹⁷.

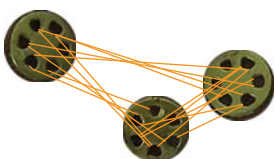
¹³ Home Net South Asia (HNSA) -Working in Garment Supply Chain: A Homeworkers toolkit

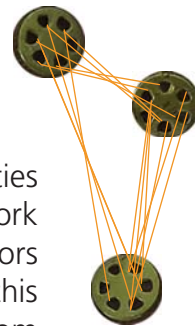
¹⁴ Fernandez-Stark, K., Frederick, S., & Gereffi, G. (2011). *The apparel global value chain*. Duke Center on Globalization, Governance & Competitiveness, 1-57.

¹⁵ Mahmud S., Huq L., *Home-based Workers in the Export Garment Sector in Bangladesh: An Exploratory Study in Dhaka City, 2013*, Centre for Gender and Social Transformation (CGST). *Home-based Workers in the export garment sector in Bangladesh: an exploratory study in Dhaka City*.

¹⁶ *The Business Standard* (2023). *Home-based garments workers: Livelihoods hanging by a thread*. Retrieve from: <https://www.tbsnews.net/thoughts/home-based-garments-workers-livelihoods-hanging-thread-625638>

¹⁷ WIEGO. *Home-based Workers*. Retrieve from: <https://www.wiego.org/home-based-workers-1>





Home-based work in Bangladesh encompasses a diverse range of economic activities conducted within households or small workshops. The nature and types of Home-based work are influenced by both regional and sector-specific factors. One of the most prominent sectors for Home-based work in Bangladesh is the textile and garment industry. Workers in this industry often engage in tasks such as sewing, embroidery, and garment production from their homes. Handicrafts also play a significant role in Home-based work, with artisans involved in creating traditional pottery, weaving, and artistic crafts. In rural areas, Home-based agricultural activities are common, including food processing and packaging. Additionally, small-scale manufacturing tasks, such as assembling electronic components or producing small goods, are carried out by Home-based workers.

According to Mahmood and Huq (2013), since clothing manufacturing is such a labour-intensive process and has recently also seen considerable unrest in Bangladesh, factories and employers are looking to hire workers in the most flexible and informal ways possible, not only to cut costs of production but also to avoid having to deal with worker demands and unrest.

Data from the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics' Labour Force Survey 2016-2017 highlights the substantial presence of the informal sector, which includes Home-based work, in the country's labour force. This sector employed approximately 85.8% of the total employed population in Bangladesh, underscoring the significant contribution of Home-based work to the country's GDP. Home-based work in the informal sector is a critical component of Bangladesh's economy. As per ILO report, women comprised around 36% of the informal labour force, especially in the textile and garment industry. Gender-specific challenges, such as unequal pay and limited opportunities for skill development, are prevalent among women Home-based workers.

According to Home net South Asia, it is estimated that there are over 67 million Home-based workers in just four countries of South Asia alone. These include Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Pakistan. Millions remain in the shadows and go unaccounted for in national statistics¹⁸. A majority of HBWs are women. Their labour drives industry and economies while also keeping their families out of poverty. However, they are rarely recognised as workers and access to labour entitlements remain out of their reach. In the RMG industry in Bangladesh, the women who work as sub-contractors or Home-based, are often overlooked. Despite providing "hidden" labour to leading export factories on a piece-rate basis, this sub-sector remains largely invisible. Although factory-based garment sector employment has featured prominently in academic research and activist arenas in Bangladesh, not much is known about the situation of industrial Home-based workers in RMG value chain, and they continue to remain invisible segment of the labour market. According to research conducted by Solidarity Centre (2014), there is a cost for falling below the policy radar: women's Home-based work is by and large excluded from the purview of existing labour law and highly under-represented in official labour statistics¹⁹.

¹⁸ Home-based workers, HomeNet South Asia website, accessed on 26th July, 2023.
<https://hnsa.org.in/home-based-workers>

¹⁹ Garrafa, V. (2014). *Solidarity and cooperation. Handbook of global bioethics*, 169-186.

With respect to Bangladesh Labour Law, 2006 and subsequent amendments the major ongoing debate is regarding whether Home-based workers are dependent or independent and the fact that the labour contract is almost non-existent for these workers²⁰. In official labour force statistics women's home-based work is not recognized as economic activity.²¹ While the ILO Convention (C177) passed in 1996 gave a great boost to the efforts of activists to gain recognition for HBW as "workers"²² (Sudarshan and Sinha 2011).. The policy gap in the context of Home-based workers in Bangladesh refers to the lack of comprehensive and effective policies that adequately address the specific needs and challenges faced by this workforce. Home-based workers, particularly those in the informal sector, often operate without the protections and benefits that formal employment provides. Some of the policy gaps are-

- a. **Lack of Legal Protections:** Home-based workers in Bangladesh, especially those in the informal sector, often lack legal protections and recognition. They may not have formal employment contracts or access to labour rights and benefits, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and unsafe working conditions.
- b. **Inadequate Social Protection:** Many Home-based workers do not have access to social protection programs, such as health insurance, retirement benefits, or maternity leave. This leaves them financially insecure in times of illness, disability, or old age.
- c. **Low Income and Lack of Collective Bargaining:** Home-based workers often earn low wages and have limited collective bargaining power. The absence of unions or associations further restricts their ability to negotiate for better working conditions and fair wages.
- d. **Gender Disparities:** Women constitute a significant portion of Home-based workers in Bangladesh, and they face specific challenges related to gender-based pay gaps and limited opportunities for skill development and career advancement.
- e. **Occupational Safety and Health:** Home-based workers frequently lack proper occupational safety and health standards. They may work with inadequate ventilation, unsafe machinery, or in unhygienic conditions, posing health risks²³.

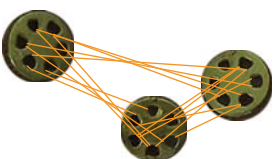
Women who engage in subcontracted work for export garment factories are not an exclusive group: the same woman will engage in two or more types of home-based work in order to be employed throughout the year. While location or place of work characterizes the Home-based worker, it is difficult to make a sharp distinction between contractual and self-

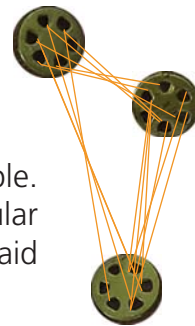
²⁰ Pearce, J. A. (2018). *The Future of Independent Contractors and Their Status as Non-Employees: Moving on from a Common Law Standard*. *Hastings Bus. LJ*, 14, 1.

²¹ Mahmud, S., & Tasneem, S. (2011). *The under reporting of women's economic activity in Bangladesh: an examination of official statistics*.

²² Sudarshan, R., & Sinha, S. (2011). *Making Home-based work visible: A review of evidence from South Asia*.

²³ ILO. (2018). *Working out of the Shadows: Employment, Informality, and Social Protection in Asia*. International Labour Organization.





employed workers as many women do both kinds of work depending on what is available. This means that although they depend on agents and intermediaries for this particular employment, this constitutes only a proportion of their income and time spent on paid work²⁴.

Since there is a limit to the volume of home-based work available relative to the number of women seeking such work, they are in a relatively weak bargaining position. Because they are engaged in different types of activities including their domestic tasks (for which they are still mainly responsible), this poses a constraint to organizing them. The demand for organization is not yet evident among HBGWs. Very few have any experience of non-kin associational life – savings and market access are the only incentives for them to become involved with associations. But the potential for change in terms of their awareness of their rights and value as workers is evident from women who received the OSH training and those who participated in trade union mobilized activities. (Mahmood and Huq, 2013).

HBW in Bangladesh especially women face some challenges while engaged in this sector. These are-

- a. **Gender-Based Pay Gap:** Women Home-based workers often face a gender-based pay gap. They are paid less than men for similar work, leading to economic disparities and contributing to women's economic vulnerability.
- b. **Limited Access to Skill Development:** Women Home-based workers may have limited access to skill development and training opportunities. Enhancing their skills and knowledge is crucial for improving their income-generating capabilities.
- c. **Work-Life Balance:** Women in Home-based work often face challenges in balancing their work responsibilities with domestic and caregiving duties. The absence of support for childcare and eldercare can affect their productivity.
- d. **Occupational Safety and Health:** Occupational safety and health standards are sometimes inadequate for women Home-based workers. They may work in environments with poor ventilation and insufficient safeguards, posing health risks.
- e. **Empowerment and Collective Action:** Promoting women's empowerment and facilitating their participation in collective action, such as forming associations or cooperatives, can help address gender disparities and improve their bargaining power²⁵.

However, the contribution of Home-based workers remains invisible and unrecognized largely because of considering their income generating activities as an integral part of their unpaid care work. Home-based workers in Bangladesh use simple tools for production and

²⁴ Nandi, R., Dutta, A., & Kaur, G. (2019). *Until We Properly Define Home-based Workers, Their Labour will be Ignored*.

²⁵ Hossain, N., & Huda, A. (2014). *Female Homeworkers in the Informal Sector of Dhaka City: An Analysis of Working Conditions and Occupational Health and Safety*. Women's Health and Action Research Centre (WHARC)

most of them do not have any formal training. Therefore, they are frequently labelled as unskilled or semiskilled workers. According to Dey (2012)²⁶, since homeworkers contribute in a part of the production, and the small transactions of Home-based workers are dependent mostly on the informal channels, they remain unaware of the organizations, key personnel and resources which are involved in moving a product to the consumers in the domestic or international market. These all finally result in their inability to strive for their basic rights.

3.2 Definition and Types of Home-based Women Workers

The concept of Home-based work is a complex and multifaceted one. In Asia, it often refers to women who work from their homes, receiving work through middlemen²⁷. In developed countries, Home-based workers, also known as piece-rate workers, are involved in various stages of production and typically obtain work through intermediaries. The International Labour Organization (ILO)²⁸ uses the term "homeworker" for individuals who work from home to produce intermediary goods. Different studies may use terms like "Home-based workers" and "home workers" interchangeably, and there can be varied criteria for defining Home-based work, making it a challenging empirical concept to pin down.

Home-based work represents a significant share of total employment in some countries, especially in Asia, where two-thirds of the world's 260 million Home-based workers are located. Globally, 147 million (57%) are women, who must juggle their income-earning activities alongside childcare and domestic responsibilities. Across all industries, Home-based work is a growing global phenomenon found in rich and poor countries. Yet while this massive workforce is vital to many supply chains, these workers are often invisible. As per WEIGO, Home-based workers are defined as a) own-account workers and contributing family workers helping the own-account workers, involved in the production of goods and services, in their homes, for the market and b) workers carrying out work in their homes for remuneration, resulting in a product or service as specified by the employer(s), irrespective of who provides the equipment, materials or other inputs used, and those contributing family workers helping such workers²⁹.

There are two types of Home-based workers. They are Self-employed Home-based workers and sub-contracted Home-based workers³⁰. Self-employed Home-based workers shoulder the full spectrum of risks associated with operating independently. They independently procure their raw materials, supplies, and equipment, in addition to covering expenses related to utilities and transportation. While they primarily market their finished products to local

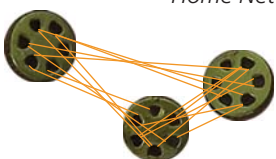
²⁶ Dey, S. (2015). *An assessment of the situation of women home workers in Dhaka city, Bangladesh*. *International Journal of Green Economics*, 9(1), 24-34.

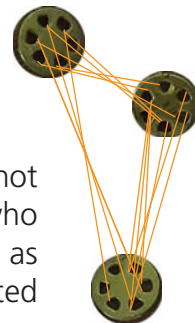
²⁷ Bajaj, M. (1999). *Invisible Workers, Visible Contribution – A Study of Home-based Women Workers in Five Sectors across South Asia*.

²⁸ International Labor Office (2002). *Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Picture*. Geneva: ILO.

²⁹ WEIGO. *Definition of Home-based Workers*. Retrieve from: <https://www.wiego.org/definition-Home-based-workers#:~:text=Home%2Dbased%20workers%20are%20defined,or%20service%20as%20specified%20by>

³⁰ Home Net International. Retrieve from: <https://www.homenetinternational.org/about/home-based-workers/>

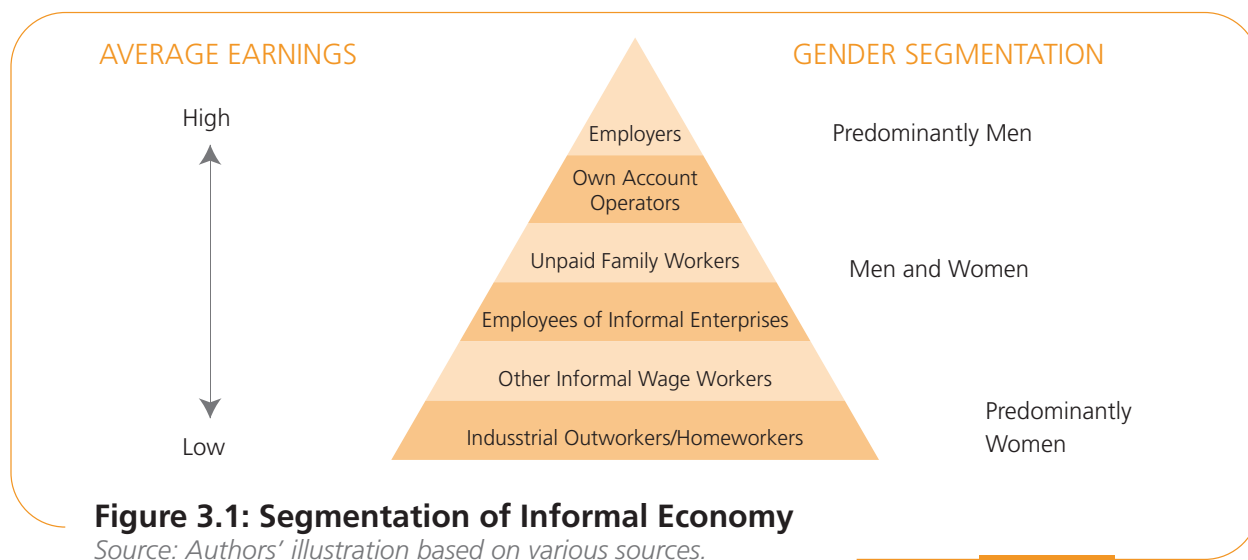




clientele, occasionally they extend their reach to international markets. Typically, they do not engage in hiring employees but might collaborate with unpaid family members who contribute to their work. Sub-contracted Home-based workers, commonly referred to as homeworkers, enter contracts with individual entrepreneurs or companies, often facilitated by intermediaries. In this arrangement, they are typically provided with the necessary raw materials and compensated based on a per-piece rate. However, they are responsible for various production expenses, including their workspace, equipment, supplies, utilities, and transportation. Typically, Home-based workers are not directly involved in the sale of the final products, and they often lack information regarding the eventual buyers or distribution channels³¹. During research, the team reached the following number of Self-employed Home-based workers and Sub-contracted Home-based workers who are involved in the RMG value chain:

No. of Respondents	
Self-employed	Sub-contracted worker
36	36

According to the ILO (2022)³² working paper, gender plays a significant role in shaping women's positions within both informal and formal economies. It emphasizes the importance of developing indicators that not only differentiate between informal and formal work but also reveal the disparities between men and women within the informal sector.



³¹ Raju, S. (2013). *The material and the symbolic: Intersectionalities of Home-based work in India*. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 60-68.

³² Gardner, J., Walsh, K., & Frosch, M. (2022). *Engendering informality statistics: gaps and opportunities working paper to support revision of the standards for statistics on informality (No. 995209293202676)*. International Labour Organization.

ILO findings illustrate that women and girls are disproportionately vulnerable positions within the informal economy, including roles like waste pickers, street vendors, domestic workers, and Home-based workers. Domestic workers and Home-based workers are particularly isolated and hidden from regulators and support networks due to their work's private nature. Moreover, they are often excluded from household surveys and business establishment surveys. Even when women and men engage in similar types of informal or formal work, there is a gender gap in earnings, with women generally earning less.

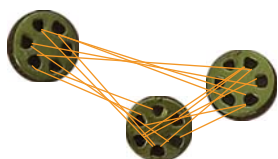
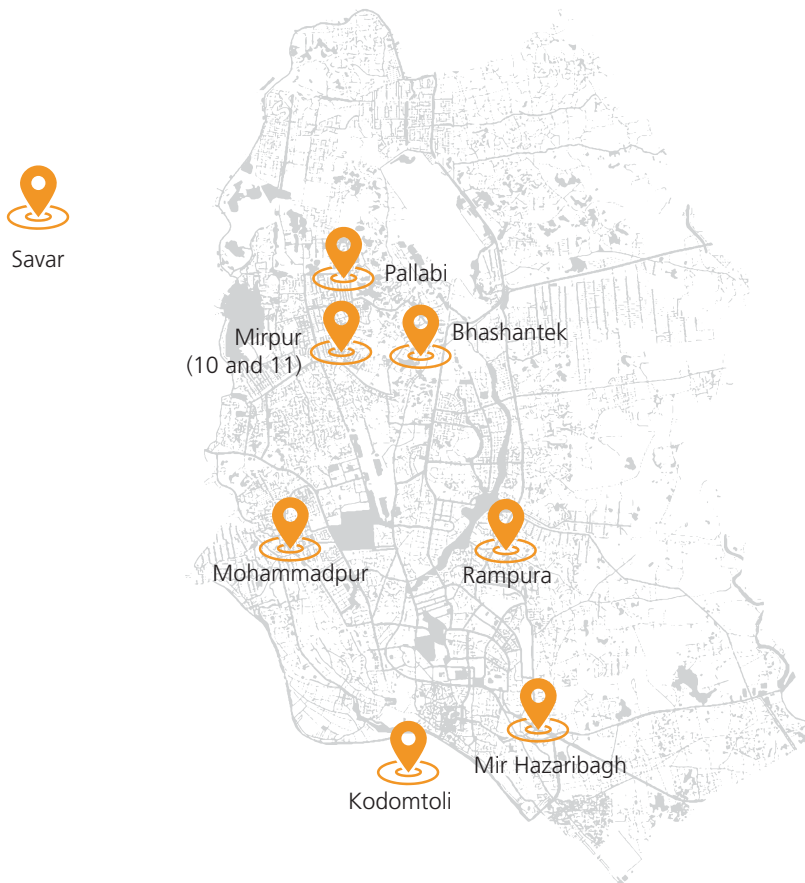
3.3 Quantitative Study Design

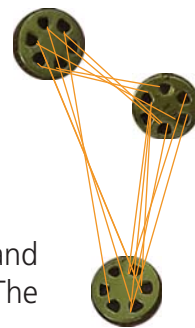
For the quantitative survey of a structured questionnaire was developed considering the conceptual framework and related indicators. The quantitative data was collected by trained enumerators through face-to-face surveys using the KOBO toolkit. The sample required estimating a proportion with an approximate 95% confidence level and 4.90% margin of error. The study used W.G. Cochran's widely used formula for estimating the sample size and it was 400. The sample distribution is presented in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1: Sample distribution of the study

Tools	Bhashan tek	Kodom toli	Mir Hazari agh	Mirpur 10 & 11	Moham madpur	Pallabi	Ram pura	Savar
Sample Distribution	61	11	61	58	55	102	32	20

Source: Authors' presentation.





3.4 Qualitative Design

A set of semi-structured questionnaires was developed for Key Informant interviews (KII) and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) which provided the data to answer the research questions. The tools, method and target groups for the KII and FGD are presented in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2: Tools, methods and target groups for qualitative investigation

Tools	Method	Target Group	Total
Key Informant Interviews	Semi-structured questionnaires	1. HBW leaders 2. Trade Union Leaders, Supervisors of Day-care 3. Contractors/ Sub- Contractors 4. OSHE team leader 5. President of Bangladesh Home-based Workers Association 6. Executive Chairman of the National Garments Labour Federation and Chairman of the Domestic Workers Association 7. Staff and field Organizers of Karmojibi Nari 8. Self Employed Women Factory Owners	13
Focus Group Discussions	Semi-structured questionnaires	FGD with female Home-based workers	15
Case Studies	Significant case stories	Research Participants	6

Source: Authors' presentation.

3.5. Limitations

When conducting research with Home-based workers in Dhaka, the team encountered several challenges that had impacted the quality and feasibility of studies. These challenges include:

Time Constraint: In the camps of Mohammadpur, time constraint was a big problem. The workers were busy till 3 pm, that is why we had to start the field after 3 pm. The Home-based workers did not give us much time to conduct the surveys as they were very busy with their household work after their professional work. So, to reduce the information gap, we conducted some FGDs in this area. A similar situation was faced in Mirpur as well. So, to reduce the information gap, we conducted KII with local community leaders and conducted FGD.

Language Barrier: In the camp area of Mohammadpur, there was a language barrier as some of the participants didn't speak in Bangla. They speak in Urdu. So, to collect accurate information, we took the assistance of some local people who are fluent in both languages.

Environmental Challenge: In the Mohammadpur area, some of the women's Home-based workers working place is too small and no ventilation over there so the environment is not working-friendly. So, they were showing less interest in sharing information. So, to reduce the information gap, we conducted some KII and FGD alongside surveys to get the necessary information.

Non-availability of Respondents: Due to the lack of respondents in the targeted location of Tongi as per the study requirement, we selected Mirpur instead of Tongi.

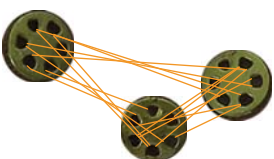
The concern of the respondents: Home-based workers were concerned about the confidentiality of their responses, especially if they faced any problems while sharing their info with the research team. So, to reduce their concern, the field team members patiently explained to them how the team planned to keep intact of their privacy intact. It took extra time for the researchers to collect data.

Seasonal Home-based Women Workers: In Savar, the nature of Home-based workers was subject to seasonal variation. Most of the women workers only get involved in Home-based work before the month of Eid or before any festive as they get lots of orders before any festive. During the research team's visit to Savar, most of the workers were out of work at that time. It was a challenge to survey during that time, still, the team managed to identify some women Home-based workers, but it took longer than expected time. So, it was very time-consuming. As a result, the field time was extended.

The challenge in Pallabi Field: Most Home-based workers completed their shifts at night, meaning they slept during the day or became exhausted from their jobs. As a result, the presence of the respondent was limited.

Dealing with Similar responses: Most of the Home-based women workers receive employment from the same subcontractor in the Bhashantek area, so their responses to addressing subcontractors are almost the same. So, it took a longer time to identify some of the self-employed Home-based women worker in this location to conduct the research work correctly. This led to extending the time required to collect data.

Data Quality and Reliability: Ensuring the accuracy and reliability of data collection from Home-based workers was also one of the biggest challenges, as they have varying levels of understanding and provide biased or inconsistent information.





4

Key Findings

Working Situation of Women Home-based Industrial Workers in Bangladesh: Issues and Way Forward

Key findings related to Home-based women workers highlight women workers' socio-demographic situation, various aspects of their employment, challenges, and contributions.

4.1 Socio-Demographic Situation

The socio-demographic situation of Home-based women workers can vary widely depending on the region, industry, and local context. However, certain socio-demographic characteristics are often observed among this group. The research team interviewed Home-based workers in different locations of Dhaka city with different age groups. The targeted locations of Dhaka city are Bhashantek, Kodomtoli, Mir Hazaribagh, Mirpur (10 and 11), Mohammadpur, Pallabi, Rampura and Savar. Home-based women workers who are involved in the RMG sector value chain are selected as survey participants.

The key findings are described below:

a. Age Group

The age distribution of Home-based women workers varies significantly across different areas, as illustrated in Figure 4.1. In Bhasantek, the highest percentages are seen in the 20-24 and 31-36 age groups, each comprising 22.95% of the workforce. In contrast, Mirpur has the majority (32.76%) of its workers in the 25-30 age range. Similarly, the 25-30 age group predominates in Mir Hazaribagh (22.95%), Pallabi (34.31%), Rampura (37.50%), and Savar (35.00%). In Kodomtoli, 36.36% of workers fall within the 31-36 age bracket. Mohammadpur shows a unique distribution, with 20% of respondents being 16-19 years old and another 20% in the 31-36 age group. These findings highlight the diverse age profiles of Home-based women workers across different areas.

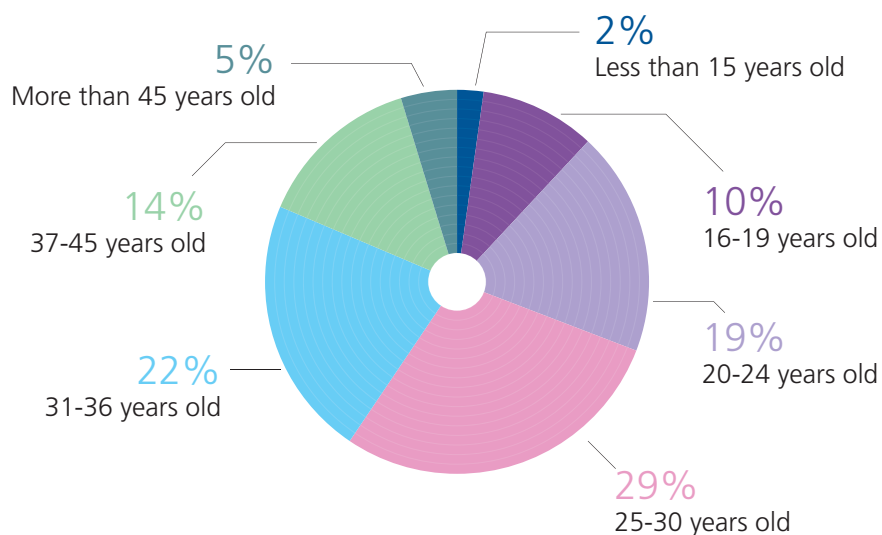
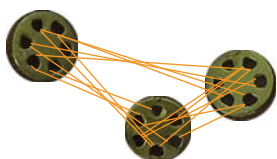
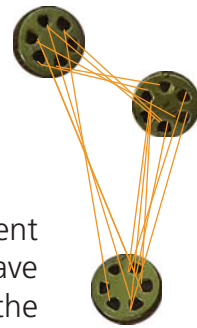


Figure 4.1: Age distribution of survey respondents

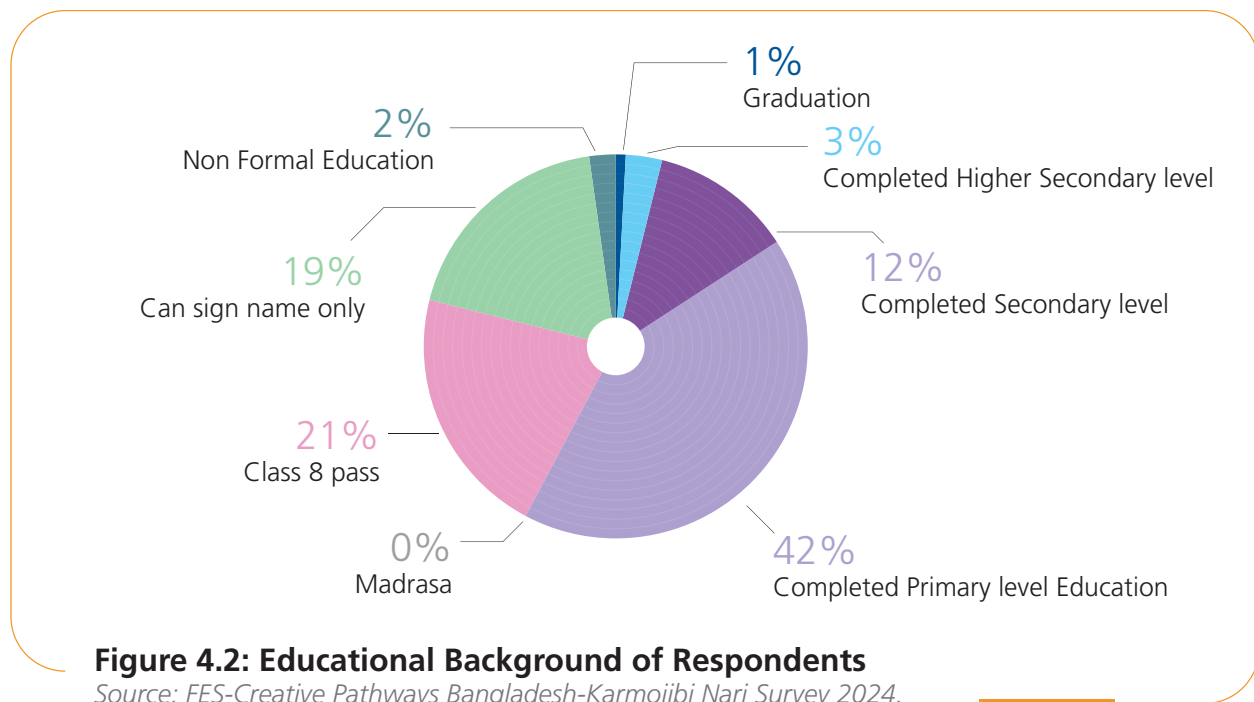
Source: FES-Creative Pathways Bangladesh-Karmojibi Nari Survey 2024.





b. Educational Background

The survey data reveals notable variations in educational attainment across different locations (Figure 4.2). A significant portion (42%) of HBWs across all surveyed areas have completed primary education, reflecting a basic level of formal education among the majority (Figure 4.2). In Mir Hazaribagh, only a small fraction (1.64%) of participants lacked any formal education, with similarly low percentages observed in Mohammadpur (3.64%) and Pallabi (3.92%). Conversely, only a modest number of respondents in Mohammadpur (1.82%) and Pallabi (1.96%) have reached the level of completing their graduation. These findings underscore the generally limited but varied educational backgrounds of HBW participants across the surveyed locations.



c. Marital Status

The survey data indicates that over 80% of the total respondents are married (Figure 4.3). A closer look at the area-wise distribution shows that all participants in Kodomtoli are married. The highest percentages of unmarried participants are found in Mirpur (22.41%), Mohammadpur (18.18%), and Pallabi (18.63%). Mohammadpur also has the highest percentage of widowed respondents (3.64%), closely followed by Pallabi, where 4.90% of respondents are widowed. Regarding divorce or separation, Mirpur and Bhashantek stand out, with 5.17% of respondents in Mirpur and 3.28% in Bhashantek being divorced or separated. These findings highlight the varied marital statuses across different areas.

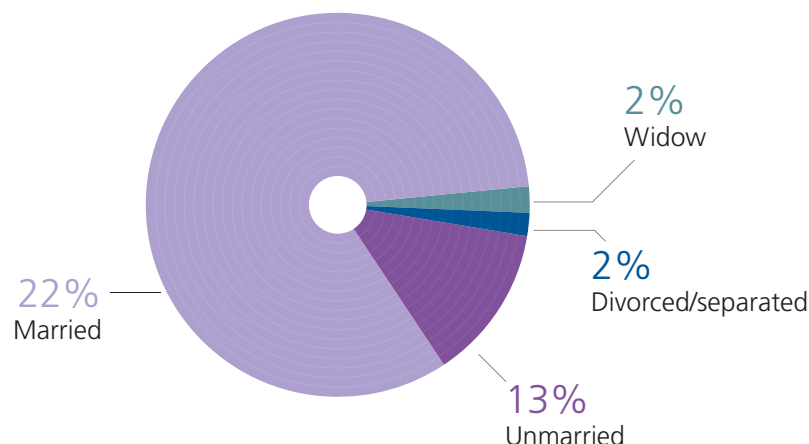


Figure 4.3: Marital status of the survey respondents

Source: FES-Creative Pathways Bangladesh-Karmojibi Nari Survey 2024.

d. Head of the Family

According to the survey participants, the households are primarily led by males, constituting 86.22%, while 13.78% of the households are headed by females. Area-wise disaggregation shows that all surveyed households in Kodomtali is male headed while Mohammadpur had the highest number of female headed households (Figure 4.4). Most of the FGD participants in different locations mentioned that most of the financial-related decisions in the family are taken by men. FGD participants from Bhashantek, also stated that they give some of their earnings from their work to their mother-in-law and use the rest for investment.

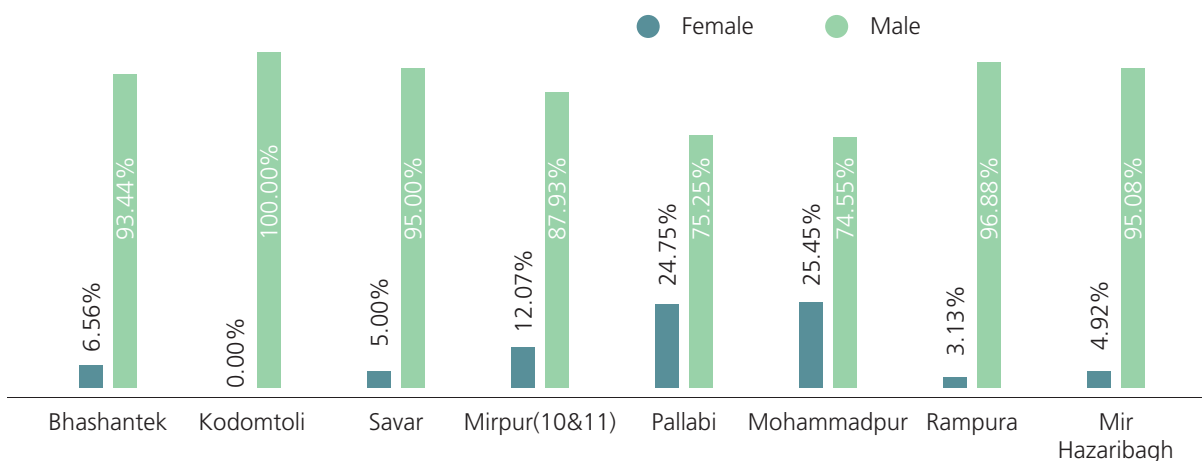
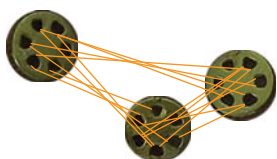


Figure 4.4: Head of the Family of survey respondents

Source: FES-Creative Pathways Bangladesh-Karmojibi Nari Survey 2024.





e. Income and Expenditure Patterns by Locations

Table 4.1 illustrates the percentage distribution of household expenditures across different income brackets in various locations. Each row represents a specific income range within a location, while the columns show the percentage of households falling into specified expenditure brackets. The data reveals notable patterns and disparities in spending habits based on geographic location and income levels.

Table 4.1: Income and Expenditure of Respondents by Locations

	Locations wise expenditure	Less than 3000	3000-5000	5000-8000	8000-12000	12000-15000	More than 15000
Location wise Income	Bhashantek						
	Less than 3000	40%	8%	0%	24%	24%	4%
	3000-5000	10%	0%	10%	30%	20%	30%
	5000-8000	0%	0%	25%	0%	75%	0%
	8000-12000	0%	0%	60%	40%	0%	0%
	Kodomtoli						
	Less than 3000	100%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
	3000-5000	100%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
	5000-8000	0%	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%
	Mir Hazaribagh						
	Less than 3000	67%	14%	0%	5%	5%	10%
	3000-5000	0%	0%	71%	14%	14%	0%
	5000-8000	0%	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%
	8000-12000	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%	0%
	Mirpur						
	Less than 3000	23%	4%	8%	19%	31%	15%
	3000-5000	63%	0%	0%	13%	25%	0%
	5000-8000	0%	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%
	8000-12000	0%	0%	17%	42%	8%	33%
	12000-15000	0%	0%	0%	100%	0%	0%
Mohammadpur							
Less than 3000	32%	7%	7%	14%	7%	32%	
3000-5000	7%	0%	0%	29%	29%	36%	
5000-8000	0%	0%	50%	0%	50%	0%	
8000-12000	0%	0%	50%	50%	0%	0%	
12000-15000	0%	0%	50%	0%	50%	0%	





	Locations wise expenditure	Less than 3000	3000-5000	5000-8000	8000-12000	12000-15000	More than 15000
Location wise Income	Pallabi						
	Less than 3000	57%	4%	16%	14%	7%	2%
	3000-5000	20%	0%	40%	20%	20%	0%
	5000-8000	0%	0%	33%	0%	67%	0%
	8000-12000	0%	0%	33%	0%	0%	67%
	Rampura						
	Less than 3000	71%	14%	0%	14%	0%	0%
	3000-5000	0%	0%	40%	0%	60%	0%
	5000-8000	0%	0%	25%	25%	50%	0%
	8000-12000	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	100%
	Savar						
	Less than 3000	100%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
	3000-5000	100%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
5000-8000	0%	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%	

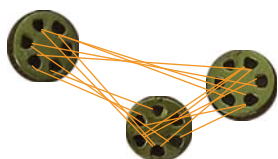
Source: FES-Creative Pathways Bangladesh-Karmojibi Nari Survey 2024.

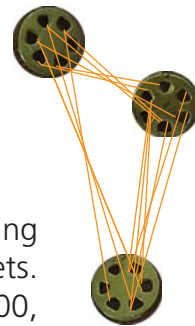
Bhashantek

In Bhashantek, households with an income of less than BDT. 3000 predominantly spend less than BDT. 3000 (40%) or between BDT. 8000-15000 (Table 4.1), indicating a significant portion of their income might go towards high expenditures, likely due to necessary high-cost items or services. Notably, no households with incomes less than BDT. 3000 spend between BDT. 5000-8000. Those earning BDT.3000-5000 display a more varied expenditure pattern, with significant percentages spending in higher brackets, suggesting an ability or necessity to stretch beyond their income. Interestingly, the majority of households earning BDT. 5000-8000 spend in the BDT. 12000-15000 range (75%), indicating a potential for savings or debt accumulation to meet higher expenses.

Kodomtoli

In Kodomtoli, all households earning less than BDT. 8000 strictly adhere to spending within or below their income bracket (Table 4.1). This is indicative of either a stringent financial management system or limited access to credit. The data points to a homogeneity in financial behaviour within income groups, emphasizing a potential lack of financial mobility or support systems.





Mir Hazaribagh

Mir Hazaribagh exhibits diverse spending patterns. For instance, 67% of households earning less than BDT.3000 spend within their means, while others venture into higher brackets. Notably, 71% of those in the BDT.3000-5000 income range spend between BDT.5000-8000, indicating potential financial strain or prioritization of high-cost necessities. The significant percentage of households spending outside their income brackets across various ranges highlights a potential disparity between income and living costs.

Mirpur

In Mirpur, lower-income households show a tendency to spend across a wide range of brackets. For example, 31% of those earning less than BDT.3000 spend between BDT.12000-15000, which is quite high, indicating substantial financial pressures or external financial support. Higher income brackets (BDT.5000-8000) show a concentration of expenditure within their range, suggesting more balanced financial management or adequate income to meet their needs without excessive stretching.

Mohammadpur

Mohammadpur's data reveals a unique expenditure pattern where households with incomes less than BDT.3000 show a significant percentage (32%) spending more than BDT.15000, possibly indicating high costs of living or poor financial planning. Those in the BDT.3000-5000 range show a balanced distribution across various expenditure brackets. Notably, households earning BDT. 12000-15000 spend strictly within their means, suggesting better financial management or stability.

Pallabi

Pallabi households with incomes less than 3000 predominantly spend within their means (57%), with minor dispersals across higher brackets. The pattern is somewhat consistent across other income ranges, with most households spending within or slightly above their income levels. This indicates a relatively stable financial behaviour with occasional stretches for higher expenditures.

Rampura

In Rampura, lower-income households (less than BDT.3000) display a mix of expenditure patterns, with some stretching to higher brackets. Higher income households (more than BDT.15000) uniformly spend within their bracket, suggesting financial stability and adequate income to meet their needs without requiring overspending.

Savar

Savar presents a very uniform spending pattern where households in lower income brackets strictly adhere to spending within their means. This could indicate limited financial flexibility or access to credit, leading to disciplined financial management or constrained financial circumstances.

To summarize, the table 4.1 reveals significant variations in spending patterns across different locations and income brackets. Bhashantek and Mirpur exhibit more varied spending behaviours with significant percentages of lower-income households spending in higher brackets, suggesting financial strain or higher costs of living. Kodomtoli and Savar show a more uniform spending pattern within income limits, indicating potential financial constraints or disciplined spending. Mir Hazaribagh, Mohammadpur, and Pallabi present a mix of spending behaviours, with instances of significant overspending in lower-income groups, hinting at financial stress or prioritization of essential high-cost expenses. Rampura shows a somewhat balanced pattern, with higher income households displaying consistent spending within their means. The data highlights the complex relationship between income and expenditure across different regions, influenced by factors such as cost of living, financial management practices, and access to credit.

4.2 Types of Home-based Workers

Figure 4.5 illustrates the process through which HBW generates their income and livelihoods. The primary source of raw materials or machineries for both self-employed and sub-contracting HBW are the sub-contracting factories. These factories hire the HBW to help support with their orders from the compliance factories. They work with two types of HBW: self-employed and sub-contracted. Contrary to sub-contracted HBW, self-employed workers do not receive specific work orders and are required to meet the specific requirements at fixed periods of time. Parallely, many HBW who previously worked in factories for many years have developed great rapport with many sub-contracting factories. As a result, they can leverage those networking skills to get new work orders and also help other HBW who look for income-generating opportunities.

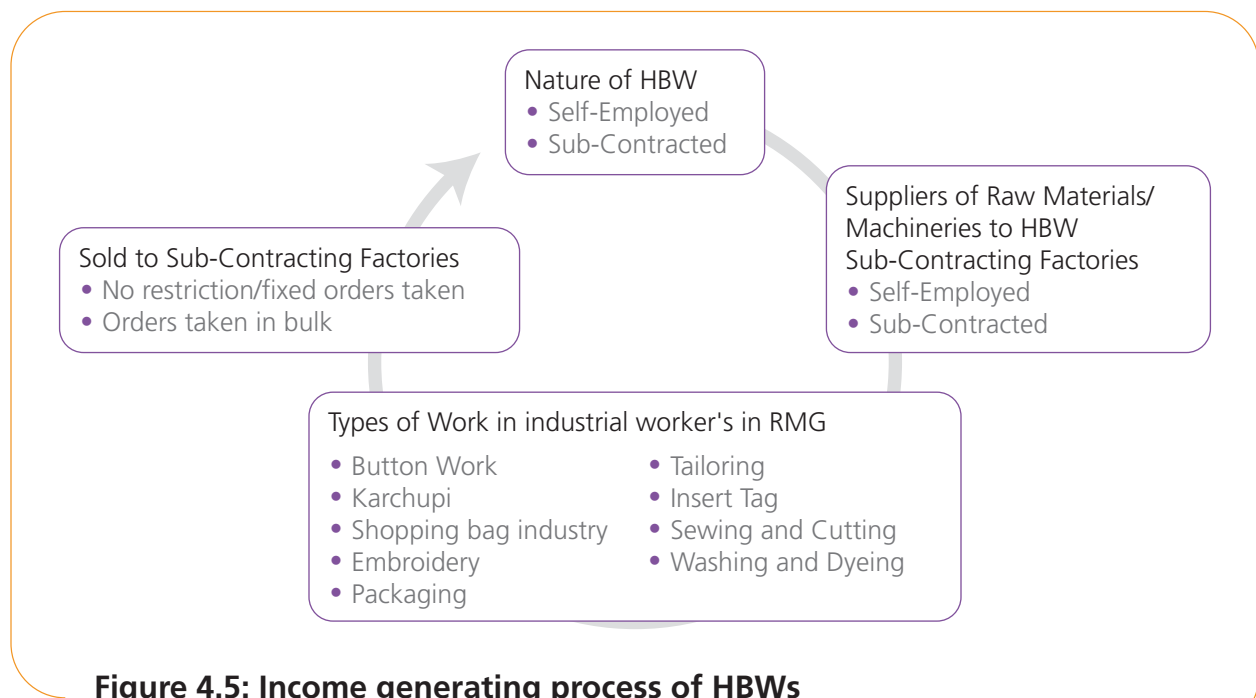
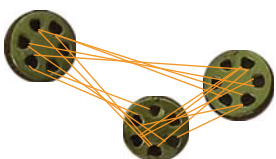


Figure 4.5: Income generating process of HBWs

Source: Authors' illustration.





According to the FGD, KII, and survey respondents, HBW often engage in a variety of tasks related to the production process ranging from simple manual work to more specialized skills (Figure 4.6). Some common types of work that HBW in RMG and the textile value chain are involved in are- fabric pieces, attaching buttons, zippers, and other fasteners, as well as creating seams and hems. In Bhashantek, some work in small, rented factories known as 'Choto Karkhana,' performing tasks like ironing, sewing pockets, pressing buttons, and fixing zippers, while others conduct tasks like cutting, sewing, and crafting at home. In Mirpur, women work on mirror and stone embellishments for garments and handmade sewing, often under subcontractors who rent small warehouses. Mohammadpur's workers specialize in embroidery and stone detailing, transitioning from factories to Home-based work while in Pallabi residents focus on karchupi, mirror and stonework, and even paper bag making, passing down skills through generations. Mir Hazaribagh's Home-based workers often handle button pressing and other production-related tasks. Savar workers engage in 'karchupi' work, stone and mirror sets, and embroidery. In Rampura, most workers are small entrepreneurs who tailor clothes at home or collaborate with local shops for piece-rate work on collars and sleeves. These women contribute significantly to the local garment industry, with each area showcasing distinct skills and specializations.

As per survey, the highest percentage of HBWs (42.11%) are involved in 'Karchupi', followed by 21.30% in sewing and cutting, and the lowest percentage of participants (0.25%) are involved in washing and dyeing. When asked about 'how long they are involved in this work', it was found that it ranged from less than a year to more than 8 years (Figure 4.7). The survey reveals that the highest percentage of participants (53.63%) has been working in this sector for more than 8 years, while the lowest percentage (6.77%) consists of those who have worked in this sector for less than a year (Figure 4.7).

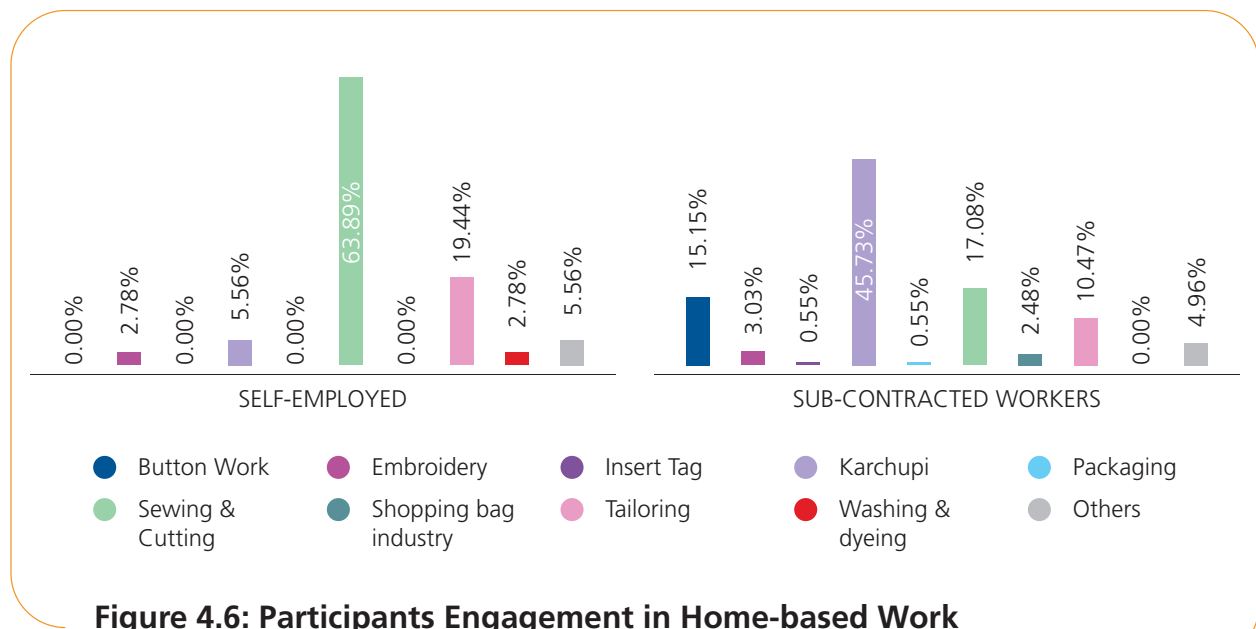


Figure 4.6: Participants Engagement in Home-based Work

Source: FES-Creative Pathways Bangladesh-Karmojibi Nari Survey 2024.

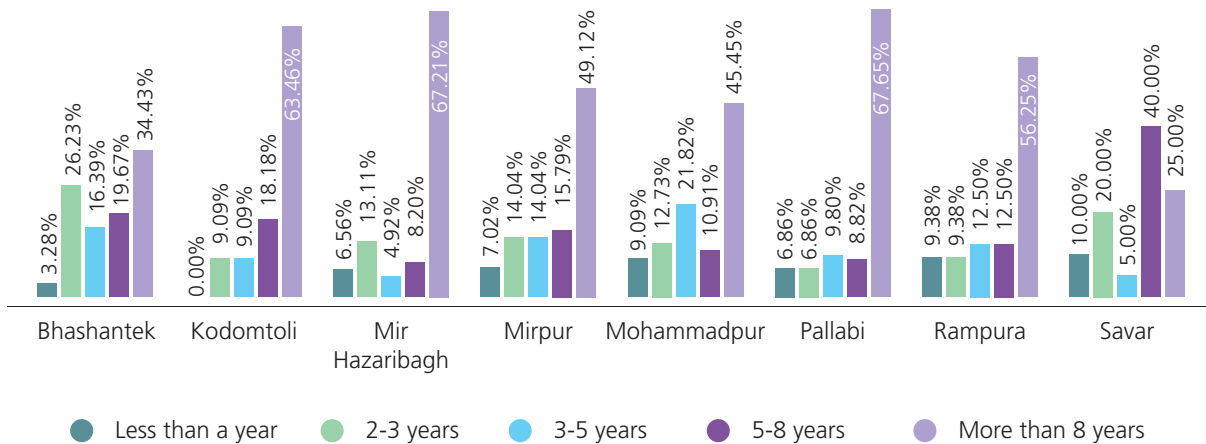


Figure 4.7: Duration of work as HBWs

Source: FES-Creative Pathways Bangladesh-Karmojibi Nari Survey 2024.

4.3 Work Availability and Working Conditions

When Home-based workers (HBWs) were asked, "How regularly do you receive work orders from subcontractors?" the responses varied significantly by location (Figure 4.8). Among the research participants, 44.61% believe that HBWs regularly secure work, 24.81% perceive that they often receive work, 21.30% view their work as irregular, and 9.27% consider it occasional. The survey indicates that 77% of HBWs in Mir Hazaribagh regularly receive work orders, while Bhashantek HBWs receive work orders the least regularly (Figure 4.8).

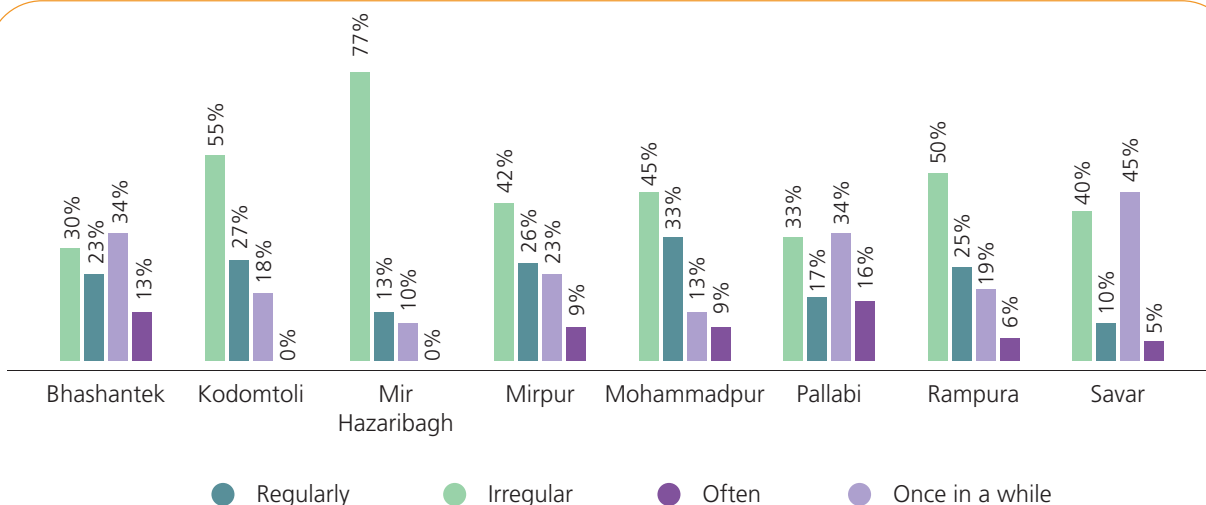
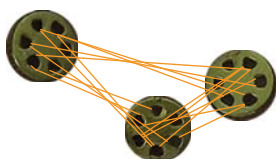
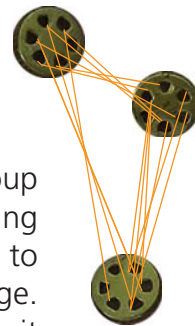


Figure 4.8: Frequency of Receiving Work Order

Source: FES-Creative Pathways Bangladesh-Karmojibi Nari Survey 2024.





Regarding working conditions, several issues emerged. Participants in the focus group discussions (FGDs) mentioned a transition from working in garment factories to becoming Home-based workers, primarily due to age-related factors. Garment factories tend to discourage hiring women over 30, leading some participants to leave as they age. Additionally, pregnancy and the responsibility of caring for young children make it challenging for women to continue factory work. While compliant factories are obligated to follow regulations set by brands and the Government of Bangladesh (GoB), including providing daycare facilities and proper health and nutritional services for women, particularly those who are pregnant or have young children, most Tier 1 factories have daycare facilities with limited capacity, typically accommodating only 10-15 children. Furthermore, the daycare staff often lack the necessary skills, causing mothers to lose trust and remove their children from these centers. This inability of factories to cater to the needs of pregnant women and mothers leads many to opt for Home-based work. Some respondents also left factory jobs due to family illnesses or marriage commitments.

FGD participants from different locations expressed concerns about job security in this sector. Typically, self-employed Home-based workers or subcontractors provide work orders and materials to HBWs. For example, a participant from Mirpur shared that self-employed HBWs usually directly communicate with workers, distributing materials like stones, mirrors, and glue. After completing the assigned work, the workers return leftover materials and finished products to the self-employed HBW, who then distributes them in the wholesale market.

The field team observed similarities and differences in working conditions across various locations. In Mohammadpur, the living conditions in the Geneva and Market camps are challenging, with narrow, damp alleyways, dirty water, and small, poorly ventilated houses where 3 to 4 people often share a single room for both living and working.

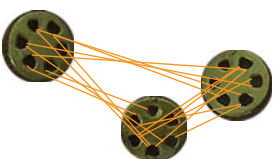
Field observations revealed distinct patterns in different areas. In Rampura, HBWs primarily focus on tailoring, competing for orders from local customers, especially during festivals. In Mir Hazaribagh, HBWs receive regular work from local subcontractors known as "Mohajans," often finding jobs through family, friends, and neighbors. In Mirpur, women predominantly work under subcontractors, some of whom operate small warehouses, while others work from home, utilizing a local subcontractor network and flexible verbal contracts. Pallabi relies on subcontractors for work, but job availability has become irregular since the COVID-19 pandemic, despite an influx of women entering the Home-based workforce. Mohammadpur's sector operates informally, relying on verbal commitments, with subcontractors playing a key role in facilitating work for HBWs. Bhashantek has a single contractor receiving work orders directly from factories, with subcontractors recruiting women. However, networking and communication challenges make securing work difficult. In Savar, Home-based workers maintain connections with neighbors to access local subcontractors, but work availability decreased during the pandemic.



We mainly do beadwork in the Sharee and veil & receive our work from the sub-contractor. The sub-contractor brings the work from the Kalshi market. We all have the same sub-contractor. If we work on a saree, we get BDT. 50 to 60. For a veil, we will get BDT 20. The rate depends on the beadwork. All together our monthly income is around BDT 2000 to 3000 depend on work volume.

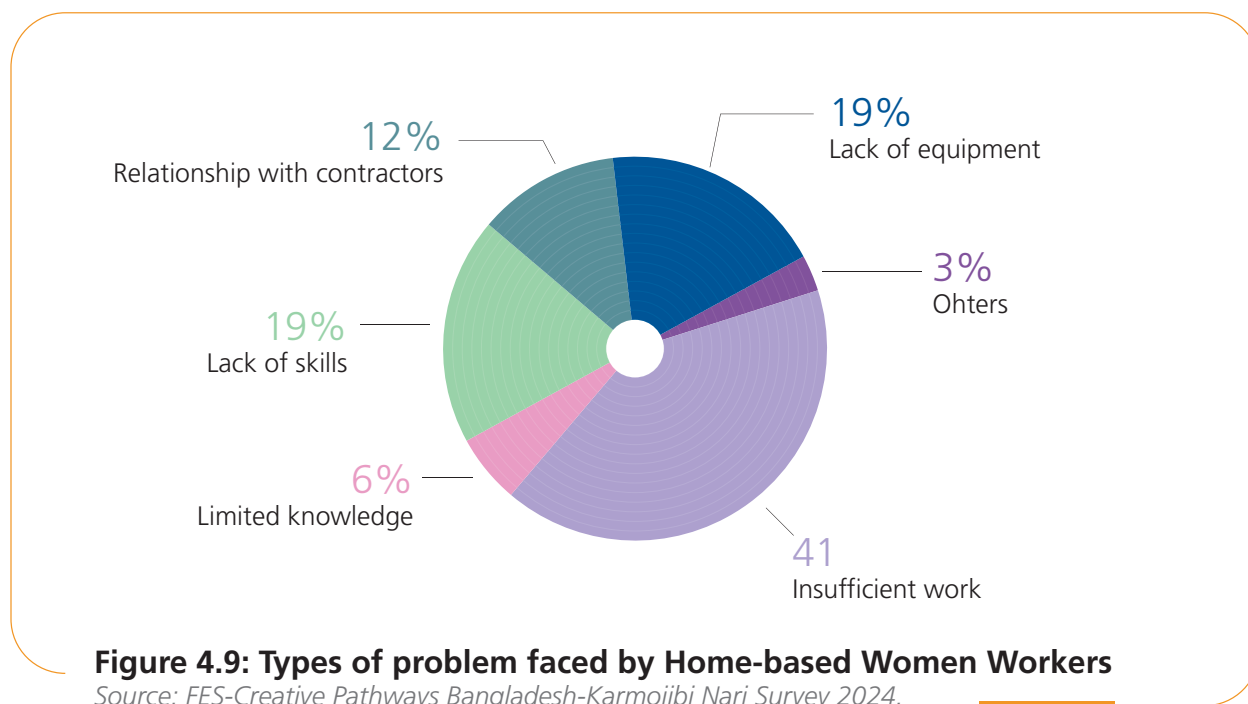


– Bhashantek FGD respondents

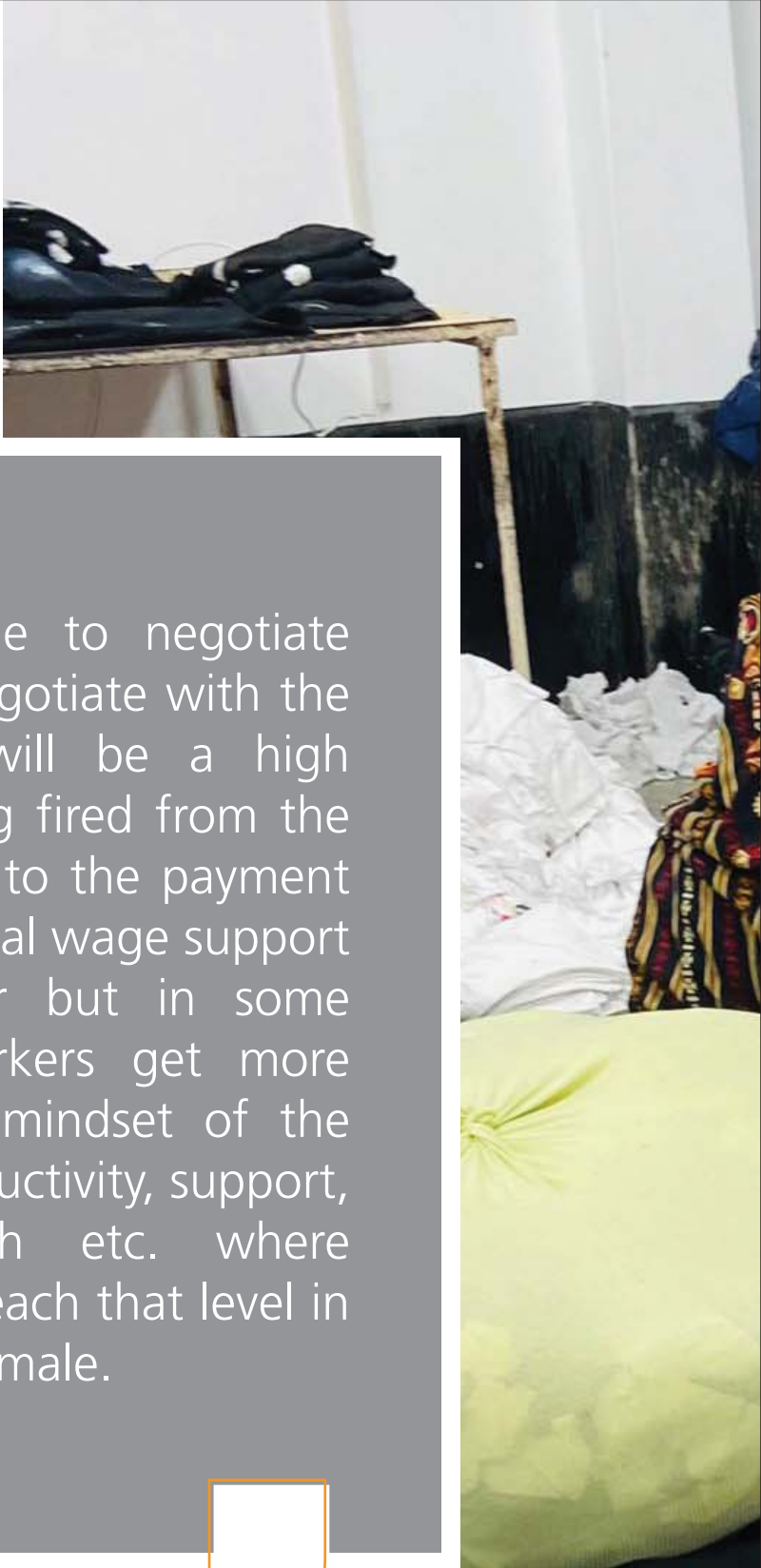




The survey respondents also highlighted the challenges faced by HBWs in securing job orders. According to the data, 41% of participants encounter significant challenges due to insufficient work, followed by issues such as lack of equipment and lack of skills, both at 19% (Figure 4.9). The relationship with contractors poses a challenge for 12% of participants, while only a few identified limited knowledge (6%) as a challenge in the sector.



The Research Team found that in Bhashantek, HBWs live in slum areas facing severe sanitation challenges. The burden of household work primarily falls on women and girls, who also participate in Home-based tasks. Work comes from subcontractors, primarily involving beadwork on garments. While working from home offers flexibility, it lacks fair wages, formal contracts, and other benefits. In Pallabi, informal Home-based work arrangements with verbal contracts exclude workers from legal protections and social security benefits. Cramped and poorly ventilated workspaces lead to health issues, and workers lack access to benefits such as health insurance and training opportunities. Children often join in Home-based work, compromising their education and well-being. In Mirpur (10 and 11), HBWs operate from congested houses with inadequate lighting. The decision to choose Home-based work over factory work is often driven by family and childcare responsibilities, flexible working hours, and the preferences of husbands. The absence of health and safety facilities, along with limited awareness of available programs, contributes to the challenges faced by HBWs. In Mir Hazaribagh, HBWs are primarily engaged in button pressing under subpar working conditions. Rampura's environment is relatively poor, with overcrowded housing conditions that resemble an urban slum with cramped tin-shed houses. In Savar, despite poor living conditions, HBWs appreciate the ability to work alongside household activities, care for their children, and rest as needed.



We are not able to negotiate because if we negotiate with the owners, there will be a high chance of getting fired from the work. According to the payment issues, all get equal wage support from the owner but in some cases, male workers get more because of the mindset of the owner, their productivity, support, physical strength etc. where women cannot reach that level in comparison with male.



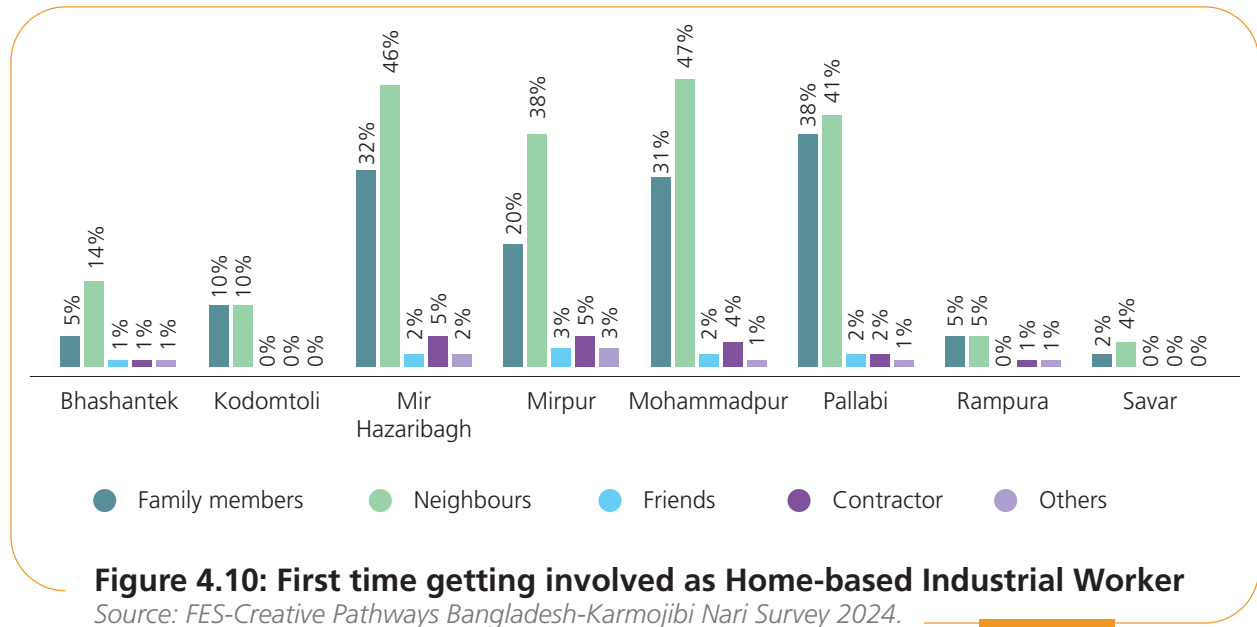
– FGD among HBWs
in Mir Hazaribagh

Photo credit by Karmojibi Nari



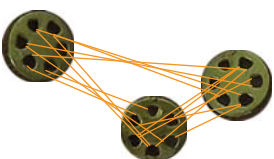
4.4 Involvement in Informal Home-based Work

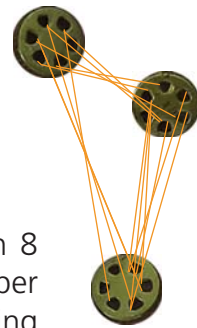
The participants revealed that the first time they got involved in this sector was through family members, neighbours, friends, contractors, others, etc.



In various areas of Dhaka, including Mohammadpur, Bhashantek, Pallabi, Mirpur, Mir Hazaribagh, Rampura, and Savar, Home-based women workers receive essential support from their family members, predominantly their daughters, mothers, mothers-in-law, sisters, and other female relatives. These family members play a crucial role in assisting with household activities and, at times, even actively participate in the Home-based tasks alongside the workers. However, it is noteworthy that husbands typically do not participate in household chores, adhering to the belief that such responsibilities are exclusively for women. Despite male family members being often away from work or business in Savar, they help whenever they are at home, contributing to household tasks and supporting their wives and female family members, particularly in tasks like the Karchupi work. According to the data, about 34% of participants think HBW gets help/support from male members in the family while working while about 55% disagree with this and only 11% think that HBW gets help/support from male members in the family while working.

The lack of adequate support from male folks of the households in household works also labour forced to disengage from institutional, factory work and resort to Home-based work. This means that there is an added social element on top of the institutional policy flaws, the responsibilities of which lie heavily on the society and societal perceptions about household work. This view was also expressed by experts working with RMG sector elements from the key discussions. A big importance has to be placed on ensuring that initiatives are taken to change the perceptions of people both at the household and community levels, parallel to the reformation of labour policies to make an inclusive women-friendly change in the society.





4.5 Working Hour

As per survey participants, the working hours varied between 1-3 hours to more than 8 hours in a day depending on the work volume and situation (Figure 4.11). The total number of working hours of Home-based workers can vary depending on several factors, including the nature of their job, personal timing preferences, and contractual verbal agreements. Most of the workers start to do their work after being relieved of their household work. Normally they work on average 3-5 hours or more than 5 hours per day. In addition, they need to work 8-10 hours per day if there is a heavy workload or peak season, especially before the EID and Puja festivals. Some of the workers like to work in the evening until late at night after completing their household chores.

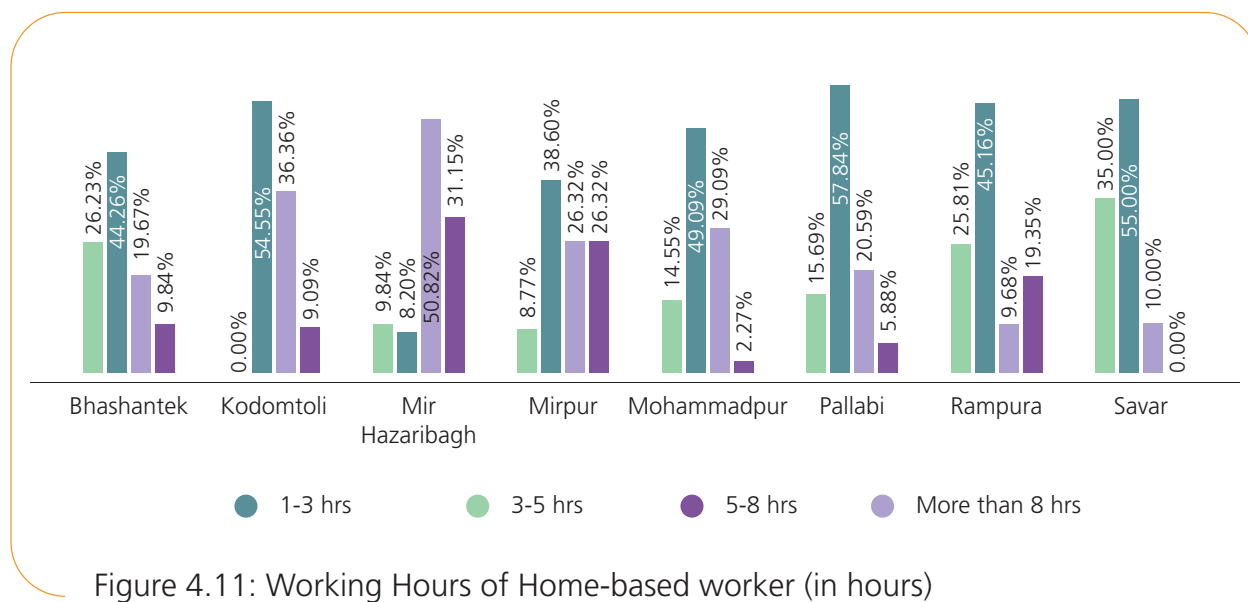


Figure 4.11: Working Hours of Home-based worker (in hours)

Source: FES-Creative Pathways Bangladesh-Karmojibi Nari Survey 2024.

4.6 Wage/Income

FGD respondents stated that HBW are often paid based on the number of pieces they have completed. They keep a record of the pieces they have completed each day in a notebook. The worker's earnings for the daily/weekly/monthly can be calculated based on the quantity of work they have done and according to the number they get paid. They also stated that most of them are dependent on their parents' or husbands' income.

Survey data indicates that, a significant majority of participants, 90.72%, reported receiving regular payments or wages from their clients or employers, while only 9.28% indicated otherwise. In terms of income distribution, 59.09% reported earning less than BDT 3,000/per month, followed by 18.51% earning between BDT 3,000-5,000/per month, 12.01% earning between BDT 5,000-8,000/per month, 9.42% earning between BDT 8,000-12,000/per month, 0.65% earning between BDT 12,000-15,000/per month, and only 0.32% earning more than BDT 15,000 /per month.

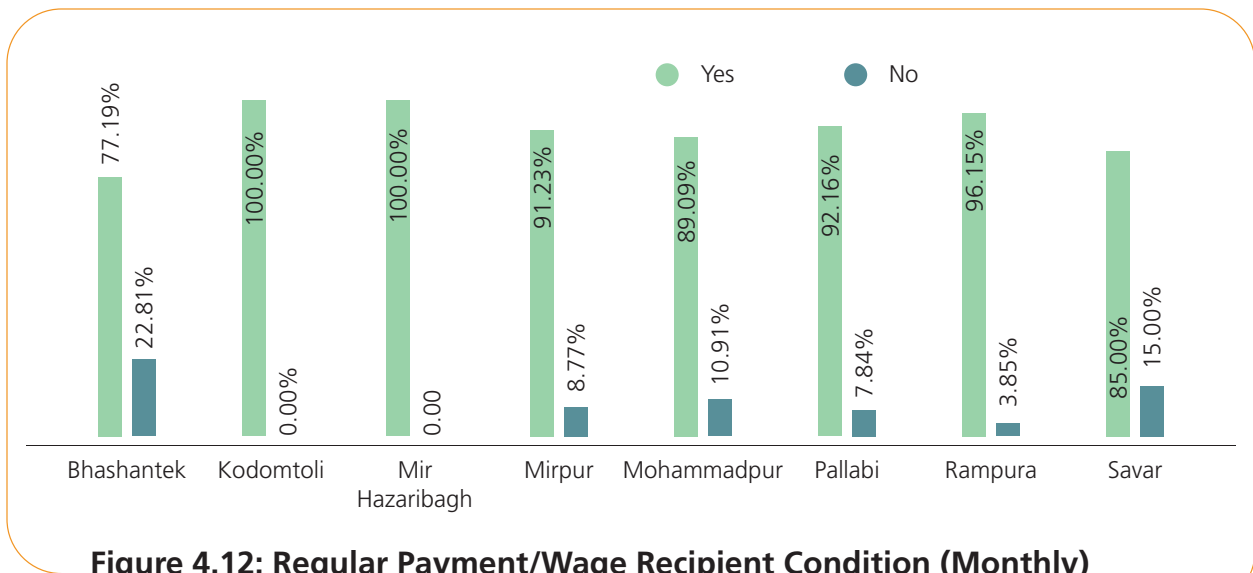
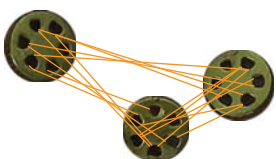


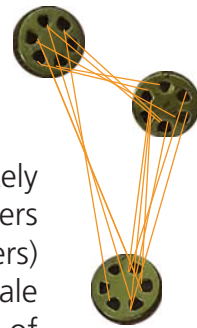
Figure 4.12: Regular Payment/Wage Recipient Condition (Monthly)

Source: FES-Creative Pathways Bangladesh-Karmojibi Nari Survey 2024.

Qualitative data findings illustrate that in different areas of Dhaka, Home-based women workers engage in diverse tasks, often receiving payment on a piece-rate basis, which leads to variable and often low incomes. For e.g., in Mohammadpur, workers specializing in mirror and stonework earn around 50 to 60 Bangladesh Taka (BDT) per saree and 20 BDT for veils, with monthly incomes ranging from 2,000 to 3,000 BDT. Pallabi's artisans make sweet boxes for 70 BDT per 100 units and earn 450-500 BDT weekly while counting paper packages brings in 50-60 BDT daily. Mir Hazaribagh's labourers, mainly involved in factory tasks, earn approximately 100 BDT daily for 10,000 button presses, with some gender-based income disparity.

This means that these women are forced to remove themselves from institutional settings. As a result, not only do they lose the opportunity to move up the ladder in the factories by utilizing their skills for economic and social empowerment in a systematic environment, but they also earn relatively less. From both quantitative and qualitative findings, it was revealed that most of the HBW earn between BDT 5,000 to BDT 15,000 on an average. However, this amount is not constant each month, depending on the volume of work orders received. Additionally, the workers also expressed during group discussions that there are months of the year when they have to resort to paying for their monthly expenditures through the savings accumulated from previous months (if any). This means that HBW are constantly under financial threat which is an added pressure to their already tumultuous state of livelihood and wellbeing. On the other hand, working in RMG factories would give them the opportunity to receive fixed monthly minimum wage rate of BDT 12,500, plus the added benefits of upskilling and female empowerment. Additionally, the ability to work among peers also provides an additional incentive for not only emotional wellbeing, but also the opportunity to learn from peers and further upskill themselves.





Through FGD and KII, it is found that subcontractors (informal employees) are predominately male who hired informal employees such as self-employed Home-based women workers (own account operators) or sub-contracted women workers (casual wage workers) depending on their needs with a low hiring cost compared to when they hired male as male enjoy more bargaining power than women. As per FGD findings, the highest percentage of casual wage workers are women, and, in most cases, they get lower payments than men. The quantitative findings also support these findings. Research participants' responses regarding gender-based wage disparity is given below:

The survey reveals that about 74% of participants think that there is a payment/wage difference between men and women workers for the same kind of work while 25.19% think otherwise. Across the various areas, there seems to have quite a variation in gender disparity (Figure 4.13). FGD and KII findings imply that Mirpur Home-based workers, frequently paid by piece-rate, receive varying wages, often lower than those in formal factories, with gender-based wage discrepancies. In Bhashantek, wage gaps exist between men and women based on the type of work performed and perceived skill levels. Rampura's tailors receive 12-150 BDT per order, while customers in tailoring shops pay 300-400 BDT for the same service. In Savar, workers lament low wages that do not reflect their effort, with subcontractors often providing wages annually or weekly based on worker needs. Subcontracted work can be highly variable in terms of volume and demand. In this industry, work order is mostly inconsistent throughout the year, leading to seasonal or irregular work patterns. Paying workers based on their immediate needs allows subcontractors to adapt to these fluctuations.

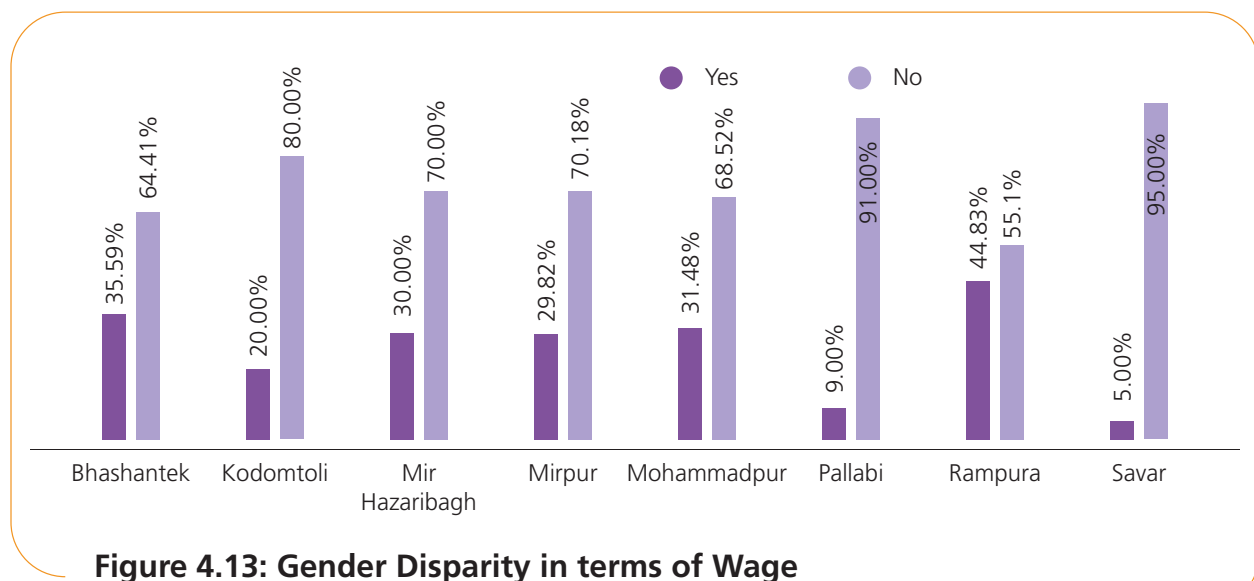


Figure 4.13: Gender Disparity in terms of Wage

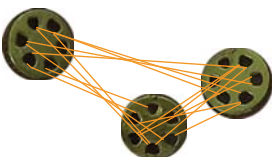
Source: FES-Creative Pathways Bangladesh-Karmojibi Nari Survey 2024.

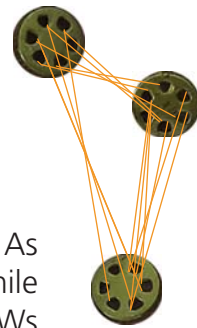


Subcontractors in the RMG sector mostly prefer male over women because they can finish the work faster than female workers as they don't have the burden of doing household work. Self-employed female Home-based workers also prefer male over female & often paid them more money than female due to preferential behavior.



– One of the FGD participants in SAVAR





4.7 Health Issues

The survey results reflected that HBWs face health issues due to their work (Figure 4.14). As per respondents, the majority (57.29%) participants stated that they face health risks while working in this sector and 42.71% stated otherwise. Qualitative data also found that HBWs face health risks due to their work. E.g., in Rampura, HBW who involved in tailoring and the utilization of sewing machines, has resulted in leg pain and various other associated problems due to the prolonged use of their legs during work.

Therefore, it is essential for all factories to cater to the specific health needs of their women workers with health practitioners, counsellors, and health officers. From the qualitative findings, it was expressed by many respondents that some Tier 1 factories have these facilities, particularly one factory was had health and compliance officers on each floor. Some facilities and service provisions should include regular free health screening, health breaks, breastfeeding corners, nutritional supplements, and diet for pregnant and new mothers etc.

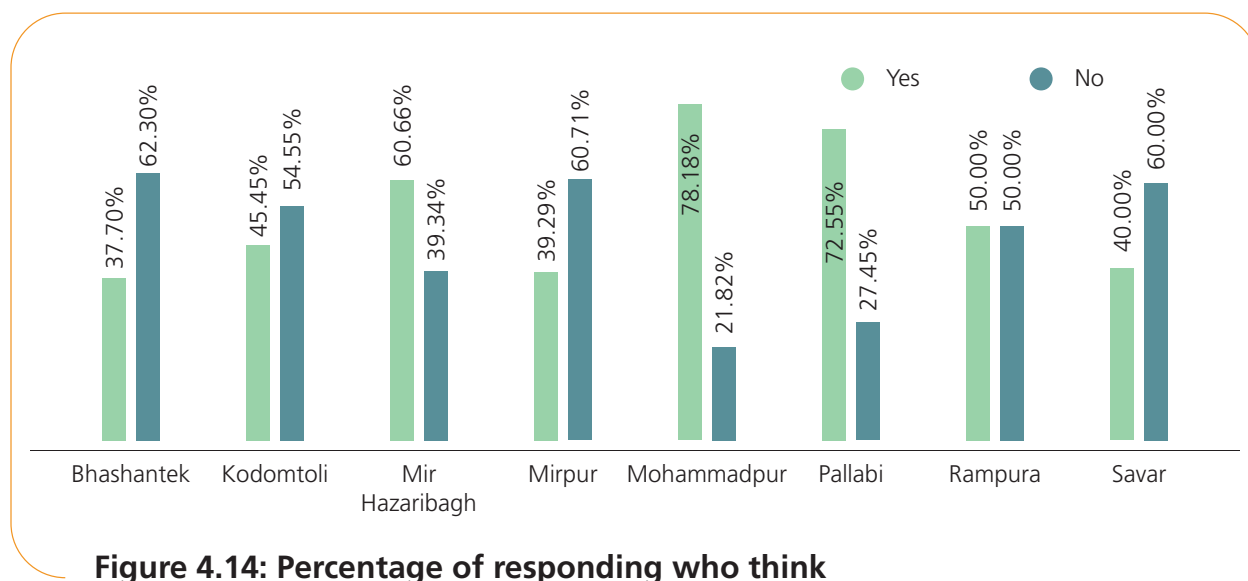


Figure 4.14: Percentage of responding who think they face health risks while working in this sector

Source: FES-Creative Pathways Bangladesh-Karmojibi Nari Survey 2024.

Focus group discussions with Home-based women workers across various targeted areas revealed a clear connection between prolonged work hours and a range of health issues. Poor living conditions in slums and confined spaces further exacerbate these problems, leading to respiratory issues, headaches, skin diseases, and stomach aches. Among the most frequently reported health concerns were persistent back and shoulder pain. Additionally, a significant number of workers reported eye-related issues, including dry eyes, discomfort, headaches, impaired vision, and excessive tearing. These women often attempt to take short breaks to alleviate discomfort in their backs, shoulders, or eyes. However, during high-demand periods such as Eid or Puja, they find it difficult to rest and frequently resort to pain relievers to continue their work.

Field visits to the Mohammadpur camp indicated that a considerable proportion of Home-based women workers wear eyeglasses, likely due to the inadequately lit working environments and the necessity of handling small materials such as beads and stones, which contribute to eye strain and related issues.

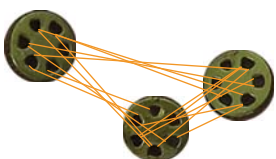
4.8 Views on Work Preference: Formal Versus Informal Work

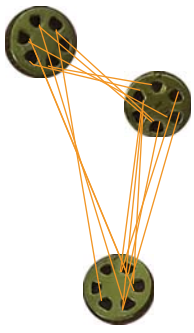
The research uncovered a significant preference among Home-based workers (HBWs) for the informal work sector over the formal sector, driven by factors such as greater flexibility and the ability to balance work with family responsibilities. The research team identified several reasons why Home-based workers (HBWs) tend to prefer the informal work sector over the formal sector. A primary factor is the "freedom of work and time." According to the study participants, the informal sector offers greater flexibility in work hours, which is particularly favorable for women, especially those previously employed in the garment sector. The ability to manage family responsibilities more effectively is another significant reason why HBWs opt for informal work. The research also found that some teenage girls who had worked in ready-made garment (RMG) factories left their jobs after marriage due to increased family obligations.

However, some women are aware of the benefits they forgo by leaving RMG factories, while others remain unaware of these advantages. This indicates a lack of visibility in promoting the benefits of formal sector employment, such as skills development, financial security, empowerment, peer-to-peer learning, opportunities for career advancement into managerial roles, and flexible work arrangements. To address these societal perceptions, it is crucial to conduct regular awareness-raising sessions and campaigns both inside and outside factory premises. Those who are aware of these benefits often regret their decision to leave the factories, recognizing that, despite the challenges, the opportunities for professional, economic, and personal growth are invaluable.

Additionally, one of the root causes driving female RMG workers to transition into Home-based work is the ineffective regulatory practices within the factory system. The limitations of the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE) in terms of manpower hinder the proper inspection of compliant RMG factories. Moreover, factories in the lower tiers often escape regulatory scrutiny entirely, allowing them to bypass laws and regulations. This regulatory dysfunction contributes to the negative perceptions of RMG work, pushing more women toward the informal sector.

Based on qualitative and quantitative findings, Table 4.1 lists views of the HBWs on formal and informal sector.





When I used to work in the garments, I had to work from 8 am to 7 pm, sometimes overtime. Because of that, I couldn't take care of my family properly. I know my life was more difficult back then, but I believe if factories are more receptive towards our demands and offer flexible policies, more women would be inclined to continue working in factories.



– FGD among
Home-based Women Workers
in Mir Hazaribagh

Table 4.2 : Views of the HBWs on formal and informal sector

Sl.	Formal Sector	Informal Sector
1.	Job Security	No Job Security
2.	Workplace Facilities	No Workplace Facilities
3.	Skills and Training	Not Fixed Salary
4.	Legal Status	No Official Letters/Documentations/ID Cards
5.	Benefits and Promotions	Low Range Salary
6.	Regulated Working Hours	Less Wage Guarantee
7.	Overtime Facility	No Safety/Insurance Policy
8.	Maternity Benefits	No Maternity Benefits
9.	Structured Wage System	No Trade Union or Workers Association

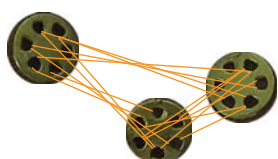
Source: FES-Creative Pathways Bangladesh-Karmojibi Nari Survey 2024.

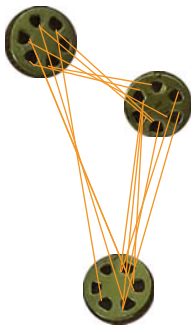
4.9 Facilities Available in the Formal Sector but Missing in the Informal Sector

In the formal sector, particularly in the Ready-Made Garment (RMG) industry, women workers have greater access to legal protections and support due to the presence of unions and other executive bodies. This access is notably lacking in the informal sector. For instance, 98.99% of participants reported that they do not receive any legal support, and 98.73% stated that they lack mental health support from any organization. Additionally, 52.39% mentioned the absence of any monitoring and supervisory authority, and 87.94% indicated that they are unable to claim essential support from relevant authorities such as the City Corporation, Thana, or Post Office.

According to Section 345 of the Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006, equal pay for equal work must be ensured for all men, women, and persons with disabilities, without any discrimination. Although this research did not include focus group discussions with male Home-based workers, female participants observed that male workers in their areas often receive higher wages and have better bargaining power. Women workers also expressed that they face more pressure than their male counterparts, as they must juggle household responsibilities, childcare, and elder care alongside their work.

The transition to Home-based work often isolates workers from the benefits and protections available in the formal sector, making them vulnerable to exploitation and wage suppression. Interviews with subcontractors revealed that many of them run small businesses and lack the resources to provide additional benefits. The lack of regulatory oversight in Home-based work exposes women to unsafe conditions, such as poor ventilation and inadequate equipment, without any means to address these hazards. Moreover, the data showed that the vast majority (93.97%) of participants do not receive appointment letters or identity cards from their contractors, leaving only a small percentage (6.03%) who do.





Male workers get more wages than female workers. It mainly happens because male workers can work all day long as they don't need to do any household chores. That is why they get more orders and more wages. Also, male workers are more qualified than us.



– Respondent from
Mohammadpur

The irregular nature of Home-based work exacerbates financial instability, leading to unpredictable incomes and difficulties in meeting family needs. This shift from formal to informal work often results in the loss of specialized skills, making them less relevant in the Home-based sector. The blurred boundaries between work and family responsibilities contribute to burnout and strained relationships. Unlike formal jobs, Home-based work rarely offers benefits such as health insurance or retirement plans, placing workers at a disadvantage in terms of healthcare access and long-term financial security. There is an urgent need to institutionalize Home-based work under the legal framework of labor rights.

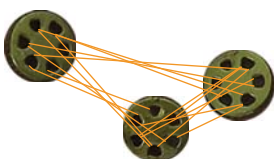
Home-based workers are excluded from the formal value chain, allowing factories and employers to exploit their unrecognized labor. This exclusion denies them the protections offered by Bangladesh's labor laws. It is essential to recognize that these Home-based workers play a crucial role in supporting the operations of small and medium-sized enterprises, which are vital to the country's economy.

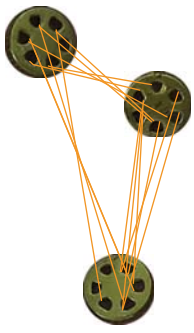
4.10 Skills and training

Field findings indicate that Home-based women workers in various neighbourhoods, such as Mohammadpur and Mirpur, primarily acquire their skills and knowledge through familial and neighbourly connections. In Mohammadpur, these workers often learn from their mothers, while in Mirpur, they gain expertise from mothers, sisters, and aunts. Similarly, in Pallabi, early exposure to handmade work, supported by family, relatives, and neighbours, facilitates skill acquisition. In Savar, shared living environments over several years (3-5 years) have fostered mutual influence and skill development among residents. In Mir Hazaribagh, many Home-based workers, with experience ranging from 5 to 14 years, initially learned their trade from parents, in-laws, relatives, friends, and neighbours. In Bhashantek, a longstanding contractor distributes work, and women often refer one another to this contractor. In Rampura, skill development occurs both through community training and family, neighbour, and relative support. These diverse pathways into Home-based work highlight the varied means through which these workers have entered and sustained their trades. However, the data reveals that perceptions of skill adequacy vary: 65.74% of survey respondents believe that women possess adequate skills for Home-based work, while 34.26% think otherwise.

Figure 4.15 reflects the perception of survey respondents regarding the existence of adequate skills in Home-based work'. As per the survey perception, less skilled workers are more prevalent in the Bhasantek areas than those in others. In contrast, Rampura existence of adequate skills in HBWs are most prevalent in Rampura.

However, it is important to note that formal Ready-Made Garment (RMG) factories provide workers with opportunities for skill development, either through hands-on experience or specialized training programs, which are often lacking in the informal sector. Additionally, RMG factories foster a peer-to-peer learning environment, enabling women workers to acquire the necessary skills to advance to managerial roles within their careers. This structured approach to skills training and career progression in the formal sector stands in contrast to the more informal, community-based learning seen among Home-based workers.





I have a very small business and as a subcontractor, I don't have resources to give the workers any facility. They worked for me, and I paid them, that's it.



– Response of
one of the subcontractors

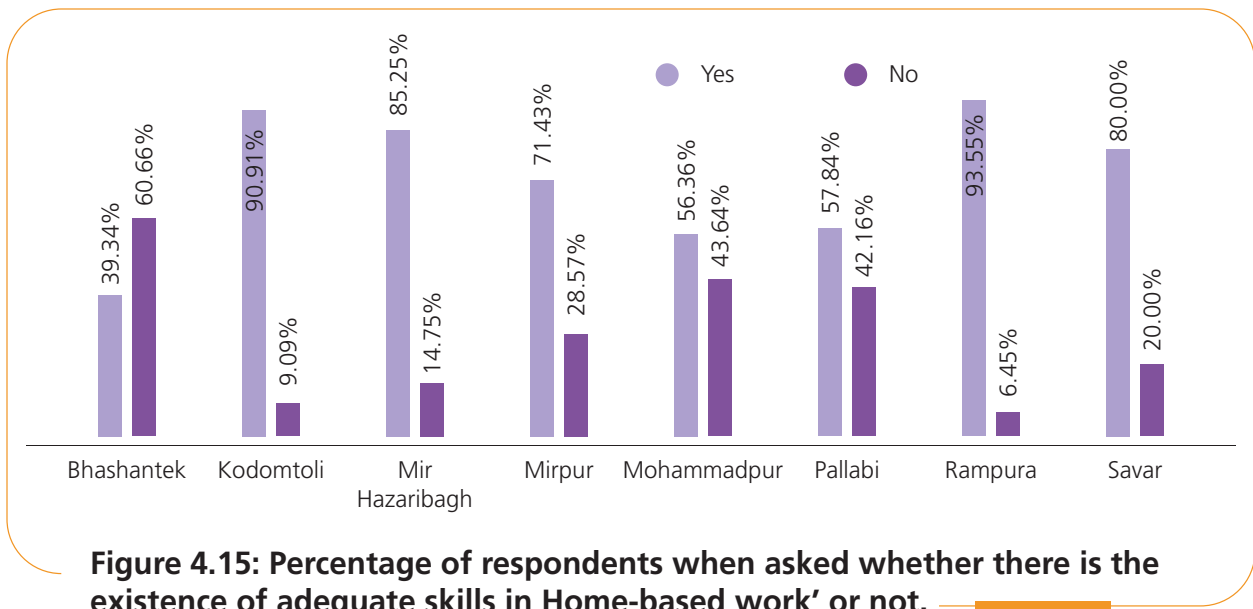


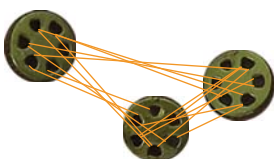
Figure 4.15: Percentage of respondents when asked whether there is the existence of adequate skills in Home-based work' or not.

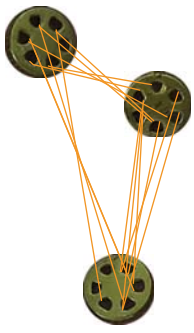
Source: FES-Creative Pathways Bangladesh-Karmojibi Nari Survey 2024.

4.11 Social Safety Net, Legal Support Provision

The research team found that many Home-based women workers lack awareness of available resources and facilities, such as government/NGO/INGO-sponsored skill development programs or free/paid support services (legal/financial/mental) offered by organizations. Only a few are informed about these opportunities but often don't engage due to the absence of immediate financial benefits. The survey data also support this finding (Figure 4.16). According to the data, 95.95% of respondents reported that their household members do not receive government Social Safety Net (SSN) support. In contrast, 3.54% believed that they receive SSN support, while only 0.51% indicated that they occasionally receive such support. The data also sheds light on the reasons for not seeking SSN support, with 47.73% mentioning their lack of familiarity with these assistance programs, 41.23% expressing frustration with authorities not addressing their needs, 9.74% citing inadequate allocation of resources, and 1.30% admitting to a fear of raising concerns regarding SSN support.

The field team found that a limited number of workers are aware of their rights and hotline numbers (109/999) but lack a clear understanding of how to seek help in cases of abuse or exploitation, often refraining from reporting due to fear of political figures.





We heard the hotline number 999/109 from the NGO meeting session. They said it is commonly associated with emergency services such as police, fire departments, medical assistance, and child marriage law enforcement. Unfortunately, the hotline numbers were unreachable whenever one of us tried to call.



– FGD respondents from Savar

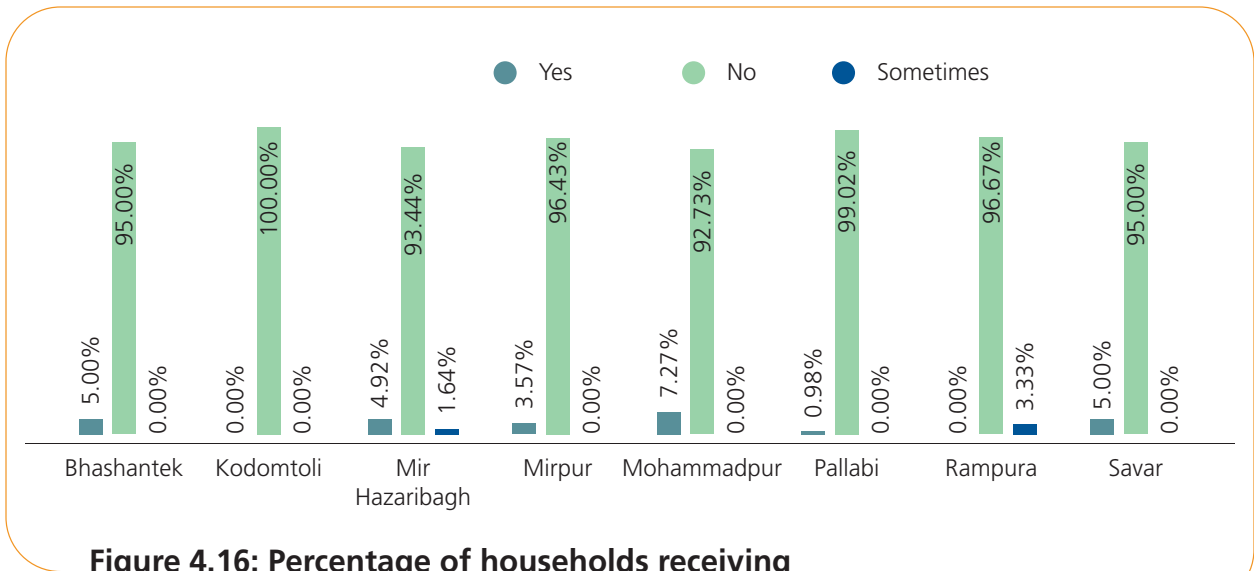
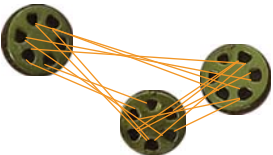


Figure 4.16: Percentage of households receiving government social safety net support

Source: FES-Creative Pathways Bangladesh-Karmojibi Nari Survey 2024.

The study team identified a disconnect between Home-based workers and their ultimate employers, as these workers primarily engage with subcontractors. This detachment hinders their ability to assert their rights or negotiate better working conditions. Additionally, many workers lack insight into the supply chain for their products, limiting their understanding of where their work fits within the broader market, where the products are sold, and who the end consumers are. As a result, Home-based workers often focus solely on completing their assigned tasks for payment, without concern for the brands or markets associated with their products. Even subcontractors, who serve as intermediaries, may have an incomplete understanding of the full supply and market chain.

This overall lack of awareness and information at various levels of production contributes to a significant disconnect between labor and the broader supply chain and market. This disconnect makes it difficult for workers to advocate for their rights, understand the true value of their work, or access the benefits they deserve.





5

FACTORS contributing to exclusion of Home-based Women Workers from the formal sector

Working Situation of Women Home-based
Industrial Workers in Bangladesh:
Issues and Way Forward

The exclusion of Home-based women workers from the formal sector in Bangladesh is driven by a complex interplay of economic incentives, lack of oversight, and global market dynamics. These factors collectively marginalize these workers and keep them at the periphery of formal employment, perpetuating their exploitation. The factors are elaborated below:

Economic Incentives and Financial Benefits

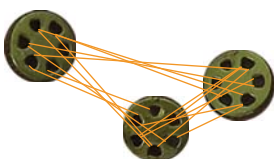
Scholars have identified the vast labour force, low wages, suitable locations etc. as the competitive advantages of Bangladesh's RMG industry. Large factories and businesses in Bangladesh's Ready-Made Garment (RMG) sector are motivated by the need to minimize production costs and maximize profitability in a highly competitive global market (Box 5.1). To achieve this, they often subcontract labour-intensive tasks, such as handwork, to Home-based workers who are paid significantly lower wages. This practice allows factories to reduce overhead costs while maintaining the flexibility to scale labour according to demand, without the commitments required by formal employment.

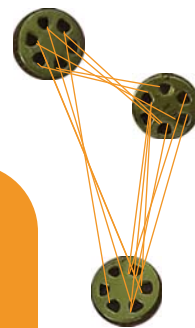
By outsourcing work to Home-based women workers, factories also mitigate the risks associated with worker unrest. Formal inclusion of these workers could lead to increased demands for fair wages and better working conditions, potentially sparking unrest among the broader workforces. Therefore, maintaining these workers in informal, isolated settings benefits factories financially by keeping labour costs low and minimizing the potential for organized labour action.

Lack of Transparency, Accountability, and Governance

A significant barrier to improving the conditions of home-based workers is the lack of transparency and accountability within the garment industry's supply chain. While major brands can ensure some level of accountability within the factories they directly contract with, they often do not extend this scrutiny to subcontractors and Home-based labour. The complexity and cost of monitoring these lower-tier workers create a reluctance to enforce accountability, allowing brands and factories to distance themselves from the exploitation occurring at the bottom of the value chain.

This avoidance of responsibility is facilitated by weak governance and policy gaps in the informal sector. The absence of formal employment contracts, coupled with inadequate regulatory oversight, means that Home-based workers often lack awareness of their rights and the wages they deserve. The exploitation of these workers has become normalized, as there is little to no formal mechanism to hold employers accountable for labour violations in this segment of the industry.





Value Chain Dynamics of Home-based Work in the Garment Industry: Reflections from a Key Informant Interview

Key Informant Interview (KII) with the representative of the Bangladesh Home-based Workers' Welfare Association revealed several insightful findings. During the interview, it was highlighted that garment factories typically rely on larger machinery and lack smaller equipment suitable for detailed handwork. Employing workers for handwork within formal factory settings would significantly increase operational costs. To manage this, garment companies outsource the work to Home-based workers, who are engaged through a multi-layered value chain. The factories do not directly hire Home-based workers; instead, they employ contractors, who then hire subcontractors. These subcontractors, in turn, recruit Home-based workers, placing them at the bottom of the value chain.

These marginalized workers receive minimal wages, often paid on a piece-rate basis. For instance, Home-based workers are paid between 8 to 10 taka for completing hand-embroidery on a single dress, with a maximum of 20 taka for more intricate tasks. A Home-based woman worker can typically complete 3 pieces a day when paid 20 taka per piece, and 5-6 pieces a day when paid 10 taka per piece. When a woman secures work from a contractor, other female family members often assist her to ensure the task is completed within the required timeframe, ultimately earning a bare-minimum wage for their collective efforts.

Source: Key informant Interview with representative of Bangladesh Home-based Workers' Welfare Association

Global Market Dynamics

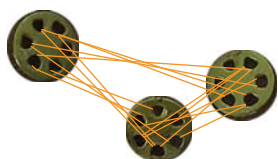
Global market dynamics, particularly the pressure to produce low-cost garments quickly, further exacerbate the exploitation of Home-based women workers. Suppliers in Bangladesh, including those in the RMG sector, often accept below-cost contracts to secure orders from international buyers. This competitive pressure is passed down the supply chain, resulting in low wages and poor working conditions for Home-based workers.

The fast fashion industry, characterized by its relentless demand for cheap, rapidly produced clothing, significantly contributes to these challenges. To meet the demands of fast fashion, formal RMG factories frequently subcontract work to the informal sector, where labor is cheaper and less regulated. This practice not only perpetuates a cycle of exploitation but also ties the local labor market to unsustainable global practices that prioritize cost over human dignity.

Exploitation and Poor Working Conditions

The combination of economic pressures, lack of oversight, and global demand creates an environment where Home-based workers are highly vulnerable to exploitation. These workers often endure hazardous working conditions, including long hours, inadequate lighting, and repetitive tasks that lead to health issues such as migraines, back pain, and vision problems. FGD findings highlight that Home-based workers work in their home after maintaining their domestic work, they cannot work full time. They manage to work 3-4 hours after completing household care work. If they have a deadline to finish any order, they work the whole night to complete it. As a result, it affects their health. They often suffer from migraine, backache, eyesight issues etc. Many Home-based workers juggle their paid labor with domestic responsibilities, often working late into the night to meet deadlines, which further deteriorates their health.

Moreover, the informal nature of home-based work means that these workers receive little to no formal training, relying instead on basic skills acquired informally. According to the FGD with HBW respondents, they didn't get any training for this job. They think, for this job, it's not needed to train-up for this work because anyone can do this work easily by observing very carefully. Education is not a must for doing these jobs. There is no opportunity to contact the industrial authority directly because they get this work from a local contractor/sub-contractor." This means that lack of skill development limits their ability to demand better wages or working conditions, making them easy targets for exploitation. The normalization of these exploitative practices, combined with the workers' limited awareness of their rights, ensures that they remain marginalized within the broader economy.





6

Importance of including Home-based Women Workers into Formal Sector

Working Situation of Women Home-based
Industrial Workers in Bangladesh:
Issues and Way Forward

The inclusion of Home-based women workers into the formal sector is vital for several reasons, particularly in light of the new EU Due Diligence Directive and the broader context of improving labor standards in countries like Bangladesh. Here are the key points emphasizing the importance of this inclusion:

Economic Empowerment and Equality

Income Stability

One of the Home-based women workers stated that, 'In Formal sector workers receive regular and fixed wages or salaries by the end of the month. Informal sector workers are paid irregularly, often on a piece-rate basis or based on the quantity of work they produce. Their income might vary significantly from one period to another. So, income stability is one of the challenges for them. 'Formalizing Home-based work can provide women with more stable and predictable incomes compared to the often irregular and underpaid informal sector.

Financial Independence

FGD findings illustrates that women in the informal sector do not have any fixed income. As mentioned by one participant that as there is irregular orders received by the Home-based women worker, there is no fixed income. In some months, especially during Eid and Puja festivals, they earn around BDT.12,000 -15,000 whereas during off season, they earn barely around BDT.3,000 at most. As a result, they are unable to contribute to the family properly. Access to formal employment opportunities enhances women's financial independence, empowering them to make significant contributions to their households and communities.

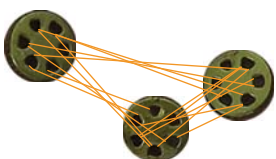
Legal and Social Protections

Worker Rights

Qualitative findings highlight that in the informal sector like subcontractor work, no official appointment letter is provided. They have been told verbally that they have to work from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. In formal sectors like big garment factories, general duty is from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. That means they have to work 3 hours more without any overtime wages. Inclusion in the formal sector ensures that Home-based women workers are covered by labour laws, granting them rights such as minimum wage, safe working conditions, and protection against exploitation and harassment.

Social Security Benefits

KII findings illustrates that in garment factories, workers are entitled to legal protections and benefits provided by labour laws. They often have access to benefits such as social security, health insurance, and paid leave. Home-based workers are not getting legal protections and benefits that are provided by labour laws. They also do not have access to social security, health insurance, or paid. Formal employment typically comes with access to benefits like health insurance, pensions, and maternity leave, which are crucial for the well-being of women and their families.



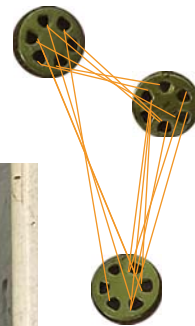


Photo credit by Karmojibi Nari

Compliance with International Standards

Human Rights

The EU Due Diligence Directive requires companies to adhere to human rights standards throughout their supply chains³³. Including Home-based workers in the formal sector helps multinational corporations comply with these regulations by ensuring that all parts of their supply chain are monitored and regulated.

Environmental Standards

Formalization can help in better monitoring and managing environmental impacts associated with production processes, aligning with the directive's environmental standards.

³³ The Daily Star (2024). What does the EU due diligence directive mean for Bangladesh? Retrieve from. <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/views/news/what-does-the-eu-due-diligence-directive-mean-bangladesh-362299>
1

Improved Working Conditions

Health and Safety

Qualitative findings showed that formal sector workers receive regular and fixed wages or salaries by the end of the month. Informal sector workers don't have proper safety equipment and face a higher risk of workplace accidents and health issues. The subcontractor will not take responsibility if any worker is injured whereas in the formal sector, if any accident occurs, factory management bound to take responsibility and provide assistance to the victims. Formal sector jobs are generally subject to health and safety regulations, reducing the risks of workplace injuries and illnesses that are more common in the informal sector.

Capacity Building

HBW workers participants in the FGD stated that due to lack of skills and lack of knowledge, HBW workers are unable to improve their skills hence stuck in the same work and payment structure whereas formal employment can offer training and development opportunities, helping women enhance their skills and career prospects. So, formalizing Home-based work can provide the women workers the opportunity of developing their capacity and skills.

Enhancing Corporate Responsibility

Transparency and Accountability

A study found that HBW workers sometimes receive payment late because their employers themselves face delay in payment from the factories.

A few mentions, other types of harassment like cheating by agents (not paid at the rate promised, fined for soiling products), abusive language, etc.³⁴ Formalizing Home-based work improves transparency in supply chains, making it easier to hold companies accountable for labour practices.

Stakeholder Engagement

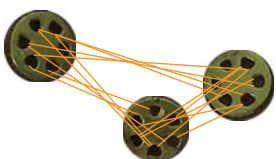
The directive encourages meaningful engagement with workers and their representatives. Including Home-based women workers ensures their voices are heard in discussions about labour conditions and rights.

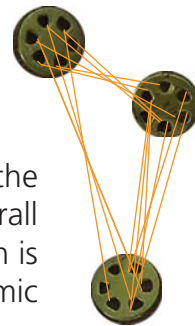
Social and Economic Development

Reduction in Poverty

Currently, the minimum wage for RMG workers set by govt. of Bangladesh is BDT.12,500³⁵ whereas quantitative finding showed that 99.03% of the HBW workers monthly income is

³⁴ Haq, L., & Mahmud, S. (2013). *Home-based Workers in the Export Garment Sector in Bangladesh: An Exploratory Study in Dhaka City*. BRAC Development Institute.





less than BDT.12,000. By integrating a significant portion of the informal workforce into the formal economy, countries like Bangladesh can reduce poverty levels and improve overall economic development as in the formal sector, there is a minimum wage rate exist which is missing in the informal sector hence HBW workers are unable to improve their economic condition.

Gender Equality

One of the HBW workers stated that, male workers get more facilities and wages than female because of the mindset of the owner who think that male workers productivity level, support, physical strength etc. are higher and women cannot reach that level in comparison with male. Promoting the inclusion of women rights in the informal sector helps in achieving gender equality by recognizing and valuing their contributions to the economy.

Living Wages and Union Rights

In Eastern Europe and Central Asia, HomeNet called for minimum wages, treatment for workers affected by Covid- 19— including those without social and health insurance coverage, and temporary relief from payment of taxes, rents, and mortgages. They also called for support centres to provide services and information to Home-based workers³⁶. Qualitative findings also highlights that in Bangladesh, lack of formalization and union rights in the informal sector causes HBW workers often get exploited by their employers and deprived of many facilities that are enjoyed by formal sector employees. Formalization can help address ongoing issues related to inadequate wages and the lack of freedom to join unions, which have been significant problems in the Bangladeshi garment sector.

Reducing Exploitation

The Homework Convention (No. 177) of 1996 marked a significant shift in the approach towards home workers. Initially, a Tripartite Meeting in the Clothing Industry in 1964 advocated for the abolition of Home-based work due to concerns over low wages, long hours, poor sanitary conditions, and inadequate safety standards. However, in 1980, this stance changed when another Tripartite Meeting concluded that home workers should receive equal treatment and rights as regular workers³⁷. Formal sector jobs provide legal recourse for workers against unfair practices, helping to reduce exploitation and improve overall working conditions.

³⁵ *The Business Standard* (2023). *Tk12,500 minimum wage finalised for RMG, calls for increases unheeded*. Retrieved from. <https://www.tbsnews.net/economy/rmg/rmg-workers-minimum-wage-set-tk12500-746694>

³⁶ Nilsson, M., Mazumdar, I., & Neunsinger, S. (2022). *Home-based work and Home-based workers (1800-2021)* (p. 22). Brill.

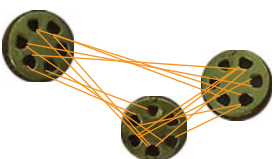
³⁷ *Internationales Arbeitsamt and Internationales Arbeitsamt (eds), HomeWork, vol. 8, Conditions of Work Digest 2, (Geneva, 1989), pp. 22, 164– 65.*

Need for Fair and Ethical Trading Practices

A shift towards fair and ethical trading practices is crucial for creating a sustainable and just value chain. Fair Labour Association (FLA)³⁸ provides guidelines and best practices for brands to follow in ensuring ethical labor practices in their supply chains. Brands accredited by FLA meet international standards for labor rights by implementing a systems-level approach to human rights compliance and social responsibility. So, inclusion of HBW workers in the formal sector will help Bangladesh to comply with FLA conditions and an easy access to all the brands that are affiliated with FLA.

In conclusion, the inclusion of Home-based women workers into the formal sector is crucial for ensuring their economic empowerment, protecting their rights, and complying with international labour and environmental standards. It also supports broader social and economic development goals by enhancing transparency, accountability, and gender equality within the workforce.

³⁸ Fair Labor Association Website. Retrieved from.
https://www.fairlabor.org/members/fla-accredited/?member_type=fla-accredited





7

Recommendations and Conclusions

Working Situation of Women Home-based
Industrial Workers in Bangladesh:
Issues and Way Forward

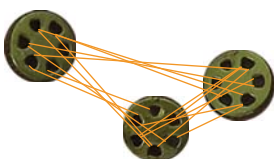
7.1 Recommendations

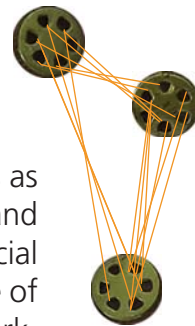
Government Roles and Responsibilities/Initiatives:

- **Ratification of ILO Convention related to HBW:** Bangladesh should ratify the ILO Home Work Convention 1996 (Convention no. 177 and Home Work Recommendation no. 184) and introduce/amend related laws, policies, legislation, or schemes reflecting the convention constraints on activists in Bangladesh to effectively engage in actions for the rights of HBW.
- **Recognition and Representation of HB work in the National Economy:** The Bangladesh government should recognize 'Home-based work' as an economic activity not as "unpaid family helpers" and include the HB work and related workers in the BBS data especially in Labour Force Survey and other related economic surveys to include the HBW in every plan and strategic papers.
- **Declaration of National Minimum Wage for all workers to Stabilizing Wages:** The declaration of a National Minimum Wage is essential for stabilizing wages and ensuring that Home-based women workers, particularly those in the informal sector, have access to fair compensation. It not only addresses issues of wage exploitation but also promotes social inclusion, gender equality, and overall economic and social well-being.
- **Certification and Audits:** The government can develop certification programs to train HBWs which will offer a process to mainstream their employment in the formal economy.
- **Develop a data base for Informal Sector:** Ministry of Labour and Employment can collect data of HBW and can include the information in the Labour Inspection Management System: Informal sector (ID).
- **Access to MFI/FI:** Policymakers can encourage financial institutions to develop tailored loan products that take into account the cash flow challenges and small-scale nature of the HBW's businesses. Many Home-based Women Workers lack formal credit histories or traditional collateral. Policymakers can work with MFIs to develop alternative credit assessment methods, such as leveraging social capital (e.g., community reputation) or digital transaction histories (mobile payments, savings patterns) as proof of creditworthiness.

Employers' Initiatives

- **Training and Skill Development and Raising Awareness:** Offer training and skill development programs customized to the unique needs of Home-based women workers, including vocational training and digital literacy initiatives. Offering training programs and workshops to Home-based women workers (HBW) can enhance their skills, making them more competitive in their respective informal industries. In addition, increase awareness about the valuable contributions of Home-based women workers to society and the economy. Collaborate with governments, NGOs, businesses, and international organizations to create a supportive platform that empowers and uplifts Home-based women workers.





- **Benefits and Rights:** Employers should provide the legal rights and welfare supports as per existing Bangladeshi laws such as health insurance, maternity leave with benefits and wages, fair wages, leave, working hours, enabling working environment and social protection such as pensions, to the industrial HBWs and ensure that women are aware of and can access these benefits. Advocating for fair wages in Home-based work, emphasizing equal pay for equal work, can help address gender wage disparities.
- **Fair Wages:** Advocate for fair wages in Home-based work, emphasizing equal pay for equal work and addressing gender wage disparities.
- **Identifying Brand/Byers and Employers for demanding transparent pricing of products in the RMG value chain:** By identifying brands, buyers, and employers in the RMG value chain and advocating for transparent pricing, the aim is to ensure that Home-based women workers receive fair compensation for their work. This contributes to decent work, improved living standards, and a more equitable and sustainable RMG industry.
- **Ensure decent work (Safety and Health Measures):** Ensuring occupational safety and health (OSH) is crucial, Employers must ensure personal protective equipment (PT) including raising awareness about safe working conditions and advocating for necessary safety measures.
- **Awareness and Advocacy Campaigns:** Launch campaigns to educate consumers about the importance of fair labour practices and encourage them to support brands that treat workers rightfully.

Workers' Initiatives

To influence HBW to take these initiatives, it is at first essential to take policy reformation to establish their recognition and representation in the national economy. There are two activities that the workers can engage in:

- **Formation of Supportive Networks:** Promoting the formation of women's self-help groups or cooperatives can provide a vital support system for sharing knowledge, pooling resources, and collectively addressing common challenges in the informal sector.
- **Form and join occupation-based unions/associations/cooperatives to get their legal rights:** Forming and joining occupation-based unions, associations, or cooperatives is a crucial step for Home-based women workers to collectively advocate for their legal rights and improve their working conditions.

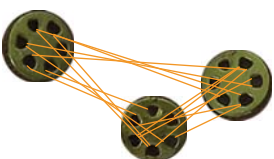
Trade Union (TU) Initiatives

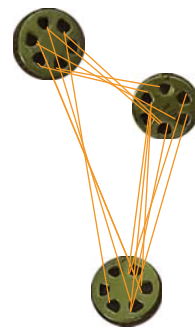
To protect HBW, it is important to establish TU in the informal sector. What can be Trade union initiatives are given below:

- **Workers Mapping:** By creating a database in a MIS system, TU can maintain records of workers, categorizing them by industry, skill level, and geographic location, enabling more effective support and representation.
- **Awareness and Information Sharing:** Trade unions can make HBWs aware of the national and international laws that protect them, including minimum wage standards, social protection, and health and safety regulations.
- **Networking:** TU can facilitate networking between workers with self-help groups and other organizations, such as NGOs, cooperatives, and government bodies, to amplify their voice and create stronger advocacy platforms.
- **Advocacy for Formalization (Identification and Recognition):** Through collective bargaining, unions can help formalize employment relationships, ensuring that Home-based workers receive written contracts, fair pay, and other protections.

Civil Societies Initiatives

- **Advocacy and Policy Reform:** NGOs can play a crucial role in advocating for policy changes that recognize and protect Home-based workers. CSOs can advocate for the formal recognition of Home-based workers in labor laws, ensuring they are covered by minimum wage regulations, social security benefits, and other labor protections.
- **Capacity Building and Training Programs:** Enhancing the skills and knowledge of Home-based women workers can improve their employability and bargaining power. CSOs can collaborate with the industry to foster skill development training programs to enhance HBWs technical skills, financial and digital literacy etc. CSOs can offer training on entrepreneurship and small business management to empower women to start their own ventures or negotiate better terms with employers.
- **Union support:** CSOs can help Home-based workers to form unions to strengthen their collective bargaining power.
- **Mass Awareness Campaign:** CSOs can organize mass awareness campaign for HBW so that they can get aware of their legal rights and other rights.
- **Legal Aid support:** Provide legal assistance, referral, and linkage support to Home-based workers to help them understand and exercise their rights.
- **Supply Chain Mapping:** CSOs can work with brands and factories to map out the entire supply chain, including subcontractors and Home-based workers.
- **Research and Data Collection:** CSOs can conducting research to collect data on Home-based workers can inform policies and advocacy efforts.





7.2 Conclusions

This study on Home-based women industrial workers in Bangladesh underscores the critical need for their inclusion in the formal sector to address the pervasive challenges they face. The research aimed to shed light on the current working conditions of these women, with a focus on advancing discussions around rights violations in line with national and international commitments. The findings reveal that self-employed Home-based workers bear the full burden of independent work, including procuring materials, covering expenses, and marketing their products. Some manage to reach international markets, often with family support. Conversely, subcontracted workers enter agreements with companies or entrepreneurs through intermediaries, receiving raw materials and piece-rate compensation while bearing production costs. These workers typically lack knowledge about the final buyers or distribution channels of their products, leading to further marginalization.

A significant portion of Home-based women workers are unaware of the resources and services available to them, such as skill development programs sponsored by the government, NGOs, and INGOs, as well as legal, financial, and mental health support services. Even among those who are aware, participation is limited due to the absence of immediate financial benefits, which underscores the barriers to accessing these opportunities.

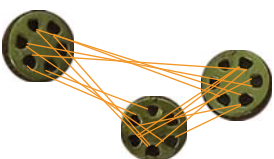
The study highlights that Home-based women workers face multiple barriers to inclusion in the formal sector, driven largely by the competitive strategies of large factories and brands. These companies subcontract work to smaller units or Home-based workers to reduce costs, taking advantage of lower wages and flexible labor arrangements that increase inventory efficiency and minimize production expenses.

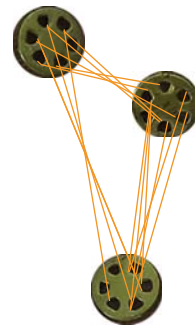
Integrating Home-based women workers into the formal sector is crucial for their economic empowerment and equality. Formalization would provide these women with stable and predictable incomes, enhancing their financial independence and enabling them to make significant contributions to their households and communities. Compliance with international standards, such as the EU Due Diligence Directive, requires companies to adhere to human rights and environmental standards throughout their supply chains. Including Home-based workers in the formal sector would help multinational corporations meet these obligations.

Additionally, formal sector employment offers improved working conditions through adherence to health and safety regulations, reducing the risks of workplace injuries and illnesses. It also provides opportunities for training and skill development, enhancing women's career prospects. Formalization improves corporate responsibility by increasing supply chain transparency, making it easier to hold companies accountable for labour practices. Engaging meaningfully with workers and their representatives ensures that their voices are heard in discussions about labour conditions and rights.

From a broader perspective, integrating the informal workforce into the formal economy contributes to social and economic development, including poverty reduction and gender equality. Recognizing and valuing women's contributions to the economy promotes gender equality, while addressing issues related to inadequate wages and the lack of freedom to join unions helps reduce exploitation and improve working conditions.

In conclusion, the inclusion of Home-based women workers into the formal sector is essential for their economic empowerment, protection of rights, and adherence to international labor and environmental standards. This integration supports broader social and economic development goals by enhancing transparency, accountability, and gender equality within the workforce.





About Nari Sramik Kantha (NSK)

Nari Sramik Kantha (NSK) platform was launched on November 23, 2016, through a collaboration between FES Bangladesh and Karmojibi Nari (KN) to create a strong and inclusive platform where women workers can unite to advocate for their rights, address workplace issues, and fight against violence, discrimination, and human rights abuses. By promoting solidarity and resilience among women workers, NSK is dedicated to building a safer, more equitable future for women in the workforce.

Facebook: [facebook.com/narisramikkantha16@gmail.com](https://www.facebook.com/narisramikkantha16@gmail.com)

About Karmojibi Nari (KN)

Karmojibi Nari (KN) is a women-headed, and women-led national organization. Karmojibi Nari (KN) started its journey on the 1st of May 1991 - thirty-three years ago, and is still marching on the road to ensure women's rights, dignity, power, and authority women, especially women workers in Bangladesh. Throughout the years, Karmojibi Nari (KN) has organized formal and informal sector workers, focusing primarily on women.

The organization also emphasizes empowering women workers by strengthening their leadership capabilities. Additionally, Karmojibi Nari (KN) advocates with relevant stakeholders to improve existing regulations, amend outdated laws, and enact new legislation to ensure the well-being of workers.

Website: www.karmojibinari.org

Facebook: [facebook.com/working.nari@gmail.com](https://www.facebook.com/working.nari@gmail.com)

About Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES)

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) was established in 1925 and is the oldest political foundation in Germany. It is named after Germany's first democratically elected president, Friedrich Ebert (1871-1925). Its mission is based on the basic values of social democracy: liberty, justice & solidarity. FES Bangladesh office was opened in 2013. In Bangladesh, FES aims to promote socially and ecologically sustainable economic policies, participation, and international cooperation. We do so through research, training, discussions, and exchange of knowledge together with our partners. We approach potentials and challenges of developments in Bangladesh at national, regional and international levels. We do this to link debates worldwide and create opportunities for stimulating exchanges on multiple levels to foster regional and global alliances.

Website: <https://bangladesh.fes.de>

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Working Situation of Women Home-based Industrial Workers in Bangladesh: Issues and Way Forward

About Author

Ms. Zakia Haque is the Managing Director of Creative Pathways Bangladesh and an accomplished researcher. She led the study on the working conditions of Women Home-based industrial workers in Bangladesh for Karmojibi Nari and FES Bangladesh. Known for her strategic approach, she has transformed Creative Pathways Bangladesh into a vital platform that supports workers, child laborers, and artists, fosters innovation, and promotes cultural preservation. Her vision seamlessly combines creative development with social impact, earning her both local and international recognition.

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Imprint

© 2024 Karmojibi Nari (KN)

Jointly published by
Karmojibi Nari (KN)
Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Bangladesh

To order publication: bangladesh@fes.de

Funded by
Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES)

Responsible
Karmojibi Nari (KN)

Designed by
Infra-Red Communications Ltd.

Cover & Chapter Cover photo
Research Team
Creative Pathways Bangladesh

ISBN: 978-984-37-0156-5